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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MARCH, 1976
VOL. 38, NO. 3

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THE CORPSE THAT WALKED AWAY

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Shayne was about to drop Charlotte Ranney as a client when he found the body—and was then knocked cold by a blunt instrument wielded by an unseen opponent. What began as a routine private job suddenly blossoms into a full-fledged murder investigation with a large hole in the middle—nobody but the killer knows where the body is hidden. Shayne must call on every ounce of nerve and expertise he owns to trap a murderer who, having killed once, is willing to kill again—and yet again.

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Publisher

CYLVIA KLEINMAN

Managing Editor

LAURIE ROSE

Subscriptions

MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 38, No. 3, March, 1976. Published monthly by Renown Publications, Inc., 8230 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, Calif. 90048. Subscriptions, One Year (12 issues) \$9.00; Two Years (24 issues) \$18.00; single copies 75¢. Second-class postage paid at Los Angeles, Cal., and at additional mailing offices. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious. © 1976 by Renown Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright conventions. Printed in the United States of America. Postmaster—return 3579 to 8230 Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, California 90048.

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THE CORPSE

Only two people knew Lou Barling was dead—Shayne and the killer. So it was up to Mike to find the murderer before he could kill a second time.

THE NEW COMPLETE

MIKE SHAYNE

SHORT NOVEL

by Brett Halliday

THE LAST THING Mike Shayne expected to find at that particular moment was the body lying on the brown shag carpet. The ground-floor apartment house manager's living room was lit only by the fading twilight and, for a moment, the detective thought its presence was some mere shadowy illusion.

Half-kneeling to dispel the phantom, however, he discovered it was all too real. The dead man lay sprawled on his

back and the ugly angle of the head suggested a broken neck. The eyes that stared sightlessly at the ceiling indicated the presence of violent death.

Murder or accident—he glanced quickly around the half-dark room, seeking its source. Only then, from some faint sound to his left and behind him, did he become aware that he was not alone with the body. In that instant, his time for speculation ran out.

© 1976, by Brett Halliday

THAT WALKED AWAY



A hard, thudding blow from some blunt instrument struck him behind his left ear. Sheet lightning exploded inside his skull and Shayne went down for the full count. . .

When he came to, he was lying in a hospital bed with a white coated intern hovering over him and the great-grandfather of all headaches. The young doctor nodded as their eyes met and said, "How do you feel, Mr. Shayne?"

"Lousy," said Shayne. "What in hell happened?"

"Time for that later," the intern replied. "Nurse?"

He was given a sour tasting mixture in a plastic cup and passed out again. . .

When he came to a second time, it was daylight and his head felt much better and his stomach clamored for food. He groped for the bell cord at the head of his bed and pushed the button. A nurse appeared promptly. Behind her loomed the massive bulk of Detective Captain Len Sturgis. Shayne's appetite vanished as the nurse cranked him up to a semi-sitting position.

"What brings you here, Len?" Shayne asked.

"You do," the Chief of Miami Detectives replied. "How in hell did it happen?"

"I guess I forgot to duck," said the redhead.

His head felt light, probably from hunger, but at least his mind was again functioning. He said, "Will somebody tell me what day it is—not to mention what time?"

Sturgis said, "It's Wednesday, eight-seventeen in the morning—and I only stopped in on the way to work because they told me you'd be coming out of it about now. Are you okay?"

"I'll live—I think. Nice of you to drop around, Len."

"*Bullchips!*" Sturgis snorted. "I wanted to know what happened to you."

"Somebody clobbered me when I wasn't looking," said Shayne. . .

IT HAD BEGUN shortly after eleven o'clock of the previous day, Tuesday. With his faculties again in working order, Shayne swiftly reconstructed the events that had led up to his debacle in the west side apartment house manager's living room.

His secretary, Lucy Hamilton, had been in the act of telling Charlotte Ranney that he was out when Shayne breezed into his Flagler Street office late in the morning. He had wrapped up a difficult case only the afternoon before and had permitted himself the luxury of ten full hours of well earned slumber.

"Mr. Shayne." the visitor said, "I need your help."

"I'm sorry," Lucy began, "but Mr. Shayne has other appointments, and—"

He detected a note of disapproval in his secretary's tone and manner that set his molars slightly on edge. It gave him an uncomfortable feeling of being over-protected, even mothered, not to say bossed by his longtime single employee and friend.

Ignoring the storm signals in Lucy's brown eyes. Shayne smiled at the visitor and said, "Suppose you step into my office and let's see what we can do."

"My name is Charlotte Ranney," she said. "I'm worried about my younger daughter."

She stated her purpose simply and clearly in accents that suggested a lower-middle class background. As she spoke, the redheaded detective studied her, seeking the source of his secretary's disapproval.

Not that Charlotte Ranney was hard to look at. To the contrary, she was an exceedingly attractive woman. She wore a pink pants suit that could have been expensive and that harmonized rather than clashed with her mahogany red hair. The loose fitting jacket was worn over an aqua turtleneck that matched her wide-set,



slightly tilted eyes. Her shoes, also aqua, looked expensive, as did the gold wristwatch, bracelet and scarab clip that were her total jewelry.

Her skin was smooth, supported by broad cheekbones that made her age difficult to guess. Her mouth was wide and full and sensual with a suggestion of latent laughter that denied the seriousness of her expression and words. A most likable member of the genus female in the redhead's estimation.

Her younger daughter, Pat, nineteen, was going with a

young man of whom she disapproved. His name was Andrew MacLean, he appeared to have no occupation, yet he dressed well, seemed to have plenty of money to spend, drove a new and rather expensive sports car.

When she finished, Shayne suppressed a sigh and said, "Mrs. Ranney, why have you come to me instead of the police? They are far better equipped than I to run a check on this young man."

Signs of alarm showed on the attractive face opposite. "The police are out of the question, I'm afraid," she said. "If Pat ever found out. . . Well, she's alienated enough from me as it is, and the mere fact I went to them might cause her to do something—irreparably foolish."

"I'd like to help you," he told her, "but this is hardly a case for me, I'm afraid. You see, apart from my secretary, I operate without a staff, which means I can work only on one case at a time. So—"

"Mr. Shayne, I'm scared," she interrupted, "and I'm quite ready to pay any fee within reason."

"Why are you scared, Mrs. Ranney?"

"For a number of reasons," she replied, "Not least the fact that I have just discovered Andrew carries a gun."

"A lot of people do in these

troubled times. I'm afraid—"

"A snub-nosed Webley—in a belt clip?" she interrupted again. "Plus a sawed-off shotgun under the instrument panel of his car?"

Shayne's grey eyes locked with her light blues for a long moment. Then he said, "I think more than ever you ought to take it to the police. I can give you some help in that."

"No." The syllable was flat and final.

"Very well, then," he said, wondering if he was losing his marbles. "My retainer is two-fifty, plus a hundred dollars a day for the duration, plus expenses. If you'll leave a check for five hundred with my secretary, I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, Mr. Shayne." She rose swiftly. "You've taken a great load off my mind."

"I only hope I don't add to it," he replied, also rising.

She opened her beige leather handbag, produced a purse and laid five one-hundred-dollar bills on his desk—also a card on the back of which a telephone number was scribbled. "I have an answering service," she added, indicating the numerals. "Twenty-four hours. You can reach me any time."

She was gone before he could even tell Lucy to make out a receipt.

He went into the outer office.

Lucy said, "Well, that was quick. I was afraid you'd waste time on her."

He placed the bills in front of her, said, "Open a case file on Mrs. Charlotte Ranney."

"You *didn't*?" she exclaimed. "Not *that* fast!"

"Here's the address and phone number." He handed her the card, added, "What rubbed you wrong about her, Lucy? She seemed all right to me."

"I don't know exactly," said his secretary. "She just smelled like trouble."

"I thought she smelled of Arpège."

Lucy wrinkled her nose, said, "*Lanvin!*" Then, "What are you going to do, Michael?"

"Earn the money, Angel," he replied. "What else?"

Two points about Charlotte Ranney rang hollow in his mind. Returning to his desk, he pondered them. One was her categorical refusal to have anything to do with the police. Her reason for not wishing an official investigation of Andrew MacLean was valid enough, but Shayne simply did not believe it.

She lacked the earmarks of a lady of social position lofty enough to feel above the law. Also, in the course of his career, the redhead had learned that those who avoid the police when the latter can be of ser-



vice to them usually do so from good and sufficient motive.

Then, there was her knowledge of firearms as expressed in her description of the weapons carried by her daughter's suitor. For all he knew, that could be legitimate—his new client might be an expert riflewoman or skeet shooter. Again, it seemed unlikely.

He dialed Deputy Frank Sugarman in the Dade County Sheriff's Records Bureau and asked him if he had anything on Andrew MacLean. On a nagging hunch, before he hung up, he asked for any information on his client as well. Then, because he was hungry, he went out to lunch at a new Pancake House on Flagler

where the steaks were adequate if not superb and the prices relatively modest. For some reason, although his afternoon was innocent of appointments, he did not feel like straying far from the office.

II

WHEN SHAYNE GOT back, less than an hour later, Lucy Hamilton was purring like a cat in a fish market. She said, Deputy Sergeant Sugarman called back while you were out."

"So...?" Shayne pushed his battered grey snap-brim back on his head.

"Our client was right about Andrew MacLean," she said. "A bad apple. Rich parents, spoiled, kicked out of half a dozen expensive private schools, arrested for car looting, a couple of assault charges, a liquor store ripoff or two—all he ever got was six months probation three years ago. His parents got the rest cut down to misdemeanors."

"That explains where he gets his bread," said Shayne.

Lucy shook her head. "Not quite, Michael. His family disowned him last year when he came of age."

"Oh-oh!" said Shayne. "Maybe a rich aunt or two in the wings?"

"Frank didn't say—there's no

record. Incidentally, he's not supposed to be driving. His license has been invalid for almost three years."

"He's not the only one," said the redhead, heading for his desk. He paused in the door to the inner office on an afterthought, said, "Anything on our client?"

The cat-in-the-fishmarket look returned with interest. "Just one item," she replied. "Last year, she was arrested and paid a fine."

"On what charge?"

"Soliciting."

Shayne went inside in a hurry, not wanting to let Lucy see how much this item rocked him. Not that such a charge necessarily meant much. In Miami, as in all major cities, Vice Squad arrests are often suspect. But he was quite aware that, although perfectly innocent women are now and again arrested on charges of prostitution, such instances are a lot rarer than the public supposes.

He had the uncomfortable feeling that he'd been had by Charlotte Ranney. No wonder she would have nothing to do with the police. He decided to try another channel of information before proceeding further, called his friend Tim Rourke at home. The journalist was not due at his job in the Miami

News city room for a couple of hours yet.

They met in Rourke's usual booth at the rear of The Beef House on Miami Avenue a half hour later. Not hungry, the redhead contented himself with a Martell and water while the cadaverous reporter, following a boilermaker eye-opener, managed to surround a not unusual breakfast of three fried eggs, a brace of thick pork chops and a mound of hashed brown potatoes accompanied by a quartet of split and browned French rolls and sweet butter, washing it down with a steaming mug of coffee and rye whiskey.

"Charlot Ranney?" Rourke tried to purse his lips, failed because his mouth was too full, swallowed and made it. Then, "Don't tell me you're involved with her?"

"All right, I won't," said the redhead. "All I asked you was if you ever heard of her."

"It's been quite a few years," said the reporter, frowning. "She used to run a call house outside of Coral Gables. Very high class. She's supposed to have retired with a bundle."

"Would you know anything about her being picked up on a soliciting charge last year?" Shayne asked.

Rourke, in the act of spearing a piece of meat, shook his head.

When he had swallowed, he added, "It's out of character—as far as I know, Charlotte Ranney merely ran her house—and damned well, too. She was, in her racket, on a par with old Colonel Bradley in gambling."

"Above the law?"

"Damn near it. If she was ever raided, the press never heard about it—and we would have. How does she look?"

"I didn't say I'd seen her, Tim."

"Come on! You wouldn't have asked me unless..."

"Okay, smarty, she looks marvelous. Lucy is eating her heart out."

"Care to tell me what's cooking, Mike?"

"I'm not sure anything is," the redhead replied. "Have you run across the trail of a character named Andrew MacLean?"

The reporter shook his homely head, and during the rest of his meal they talked of other things. Thinking it over while they chatted, Shayne decided to drop Charlotte Ranney as a client. The money might be good, but it seemed less and less like the sort of problem that required the sort of service Mike Shayne had to offer. Thanks to the fee he had earned yesterday, he could well afford to return the retainer.

After Rourke departed for the *News* city room, the detective

asked for a table telephone and dialed the number Charlotte Ranney had given him on the back of her card. He got the answering service.

"Mrs. Ranney is out," the faceless female voice informed him. "Who is calling?"

"Mike Shayne," he replied.

"Oh, Mr. Shayne," said the girl. "Mrs. Ranney left a message for you. She wants you to talk to a Mr. Delbas at two-o-three Merritt Crescent, apartment two. After six o'clock."

That was that. The address sounded familiar. Before returning Charlotte Ranney's card to his wallet, he looked at its obverse side. It was the same address—203 Merritt Crescent.

He then called Lucy, hoping some other urgent business had come up that would offer valid excuse for getting out of an assignment that was becoming increasingly distasteful to him. There was none.

It was barely three in the afternoon, so he had three hours to kill. He dawdled over a second brandy and water, then remembered he needed a haircut. By the time he was shorn, he still had ninety minutes to wait. Hoping to get out of the Delbas appointment, he called his client again, was informed that she was still out but had called in and asked Shayne to

visit her when he finished with the other call.

It was five-forty when he reached the address and parked his Buick on the palm-shaded street outside, he was thoroughly bored. The building itself looked attractive. It was a modern, two-story apartment house of pink stucco with black trim and the semi-tropical plantings that masked much of its facade were well conceived and well cared for. He judged that the rentals, while not Miami-Beach-hotel sky-high, would run upwards of three hundred a month.

He walked through an open plate-glass front entrance, saw a sign by the mail boxes on the wall that read, *Manager Apt. #2*. He turned left in the twilight to a dark red door with gleaming brass knob and locks. It was ajar and, when no one answered the bell, he went on inside.

That was when he found the body—and instant oblivion. . .

THAT WAS it—end of the conscious line until he came to here in the hospital. He sat up, felt a wave of dizziness, shook it off and got his eyes in focus again, said, "Will somebody please tell me how I got here?"

"You were found behind the wheel of your car parked by the river around eight p.m. With a

lump the size of a walnut behind your left ear. A prowler car spotted you."

Shayne digested this information, said, "Len, would you mind telling me why getting myself konked like a rookie Boy Scout is important enough to bring you here?"

The Chief of Detectives' face donned a mask of sympathy. In injured tones, he said, "Why, Mike, aren't we old buddies? Why shouldn't I come here to see how you're making out?"

The redhead set his teeth as a second wave of dizziness made the walls whirl, though not as rapidly as the first. He said, "You wouldn't put me on, would you, Mr. Chief of Detectives?"

"Oh, Mike!" Sturgis lost a fight to retain his mask of sympathy, grinned sheepishly, said, "We got a telephoned tip you were parked there—plus a suggestion that you drop the case if you want to keep on staying healthy."

It still didn't hold water. Either Charlotte Ranney's problem was a lot bigger than she had intimated or he had stumbled into another case by accident—a police case—and been coldcocked for making this mistake.

Whatever it was, it had to be a lot more important than a routine checkup on a post-

juvenile delinquent's misdoings. Otherwise, Len would not be here.

Shayne said, "It won't cut, Len."

"All right then, Mike. What in hell were you working on when you got hit?"

"You know I can't tell you that," the redhead replied. "And let's not go through the whole tug of war about having my license revoked, either."

Their eyes met, long and hard, and held until Shayne read defeat in those of the Chief of Detectives.

Waving away an alarmed nurse, the redhead swung his legs over the side of the hospital bed. He was dizzy again, but only for a fraction of a second.

Looking up at Len, he said, "I will tell you this, old buddy—there was no real threat of violence in what I was asked to do. In fact, it seemed so trivial I was about to get off it and return my client's retainer. But I've got to talk to somebody right now and get myself off the hook before I say anything to you."

"Mule—mule—mule!" said Sturgis.

"If I find you're having me tailed or bugged until I'm ready to come in, I'll make a mule look like a soft touch. And that's a promise. Okay?"

"Okay," Sturgis' tone

matched his expression in reluctance.

"Now get the hell out of here and let me get on it," said the redhead. "The sooner I get clear, the sooner I'll talk—though why in hell the police should be interested beats me."

Shayne felt the room go 'round again, even more briefly. Sturgis made a move to steady him but Shayne shook him off.

"Mr. Shayne," said the nurse, "you have a concussion."

"Don't waste your breath, lady," said Sturgis. "Lots of luck, Mike—and don't forget to write."

"You'll hear from me, Len." And, to the nurse, "Where in hell are my clothes?"

That was only one of the questions troubling the redhead. Where in hell was the body he had found on the carpet of the apartment-building manager's living room before his personal lights went out?

III

APART FROM the identity and whereabouts of the body and of whoever had killed the man, three other questions nagged at the redhead as he left the hospital. One was the identity of his unseen assailant. The second was—who had put him in his car and driven him to the parking place by the river? The

third was—who had tipped off the police?

If it were a single individual, his task should be simplified, but Shayne doubted it. Unless his unknown chauffeur had walked from where he left the detective, someone else must have been involved. In any event, it would have taken a lot of work and luck for one man to have handled so much alone without being spotted—and Len Sturgis had given no indication that the police had any leads in the matter.

It took Shayne some little time and the grudging payment of a fee to get his Buick released from the garage where the police had impounded it. Then he had to stop for coffee before driving to the office. Hence it was past noon when he got there—to find it locked and Lucy gone to lunch.

She had left a note on his desk suggesting that he return whenever he sobered up. Also, that she was going shopping for a new swimsuit and not to count the minutes until she returned.

He was rereading it, half amused and half annoyed, when the phone sounded. It was Tim Rourke. He said, "Am I glad to hear *your* voice!"

"Why?" Shayne's tone was guarded. Lucy's message indicated that news of his unhappy

night had not gotten out, of which on the whole he was glad.

"Because," said the lanky reporter, "we got word you were clobbered last night. Are you okay?"

"I'll live," said the redhead.

"What happened, for Pete's sake?"

Shayne told him succinctly, added, "Keep it quiet if you can, Tim. It's hardly big news anyway."

"I'll try," Rourke promised, "but if the *Herald* runs it, forget it."

"Thanks anyway."

"Oh..." Rourke broke the silence. "I almost forgot. I got curious about that arrest—you know, the solicitation bit—so I asked around. Remember Lou Barling?"

"The Vice cop? He got busted last year."

"That's right, Mike. And that's *why* he got busted. He seems to have had a personal grudge against the Ranney broad—I guess because he could never bring her in while she was operating. So he set her up and it didn't take. The lady packs plenty of clout. It didn't make the papers, radio or TV, but Barling got bounced from the force."

"How come it's still on the records then?" Shayne asked.

"Don't ask *me*. I was wonder-



LUCY HAMILTON

ing about that myself. Why don't you ask *her*?"

"I think I will, Tim—if I can get to her without being killed."

Shayne dug out her card and dialed her number, got a busy signal. When he hung up, the phone rang. Charlotte Ranney was trying to get *him* simultaneously. She didn't waste time on preliminaries.

"Shayne? What have you found out about Andrew MacLean?"

"He's got quite a juvenile re-

cord," the redhead told her. "I was on my way to see you when I got sidetracked yesterday."

"Can you come out now?" she asked.

"I can try," he assured her.

None of the messages Lucy had left for him was of pressing importance, so he contented himself with writing a brief note to his absent secretary suggesting she go topless that summer and save half her swimsuit expenses. When he got back behind the wheel of his car, he had to grip it tightly with both hands to fight off another attack of dizziness. It occurred to him that he had not eaten since his cursory lunch the day before, but he wanted to talk to his client even more than he wanted to eat. Luckily, the spell passed quickly and he was able to drive to 203 Merritt Crescent without mishap, though his head was beginning to ache dully.

He resolved that, when he caught up with attacker, he would give him a headache he'd never forget. . .

A large swarthy man answered his ring at apartment two—a half-balding man who topped the detective's seventy-three inches by at least four more. His belly bulged noticeably over the beltline of his charcoal slacks, there was coarse black hair on the backs

of his fingers and his face was a mask of pale pink putty from which a pair of deepset onyx eyes looked inscrutably downward to meet Shayne's gaze.

"Mr. Delbas?" said the redhead, wondering if it was one of those massive fists that had put him down for the count.

"Yes?" The giant's voice was unexpectedly light and high.

"Mrs. Ranney asked me to speak to you. I'm Mike Shayne."

"That was yesterday."

"I was here," said the detective, "a few minutes before six."

"I was out. Sorry." Delbas stood back to admit him. When the door was closed, he said, "I suppose it's about Andrew MacLean."

A dog barked from behind a closed door. Delbas said, "It's all right, Fritz." Then, to the detective, "I have to keep him shut in the bedroom. If I don't, he barks at everyone. He's a good watchdog. Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

While the huge manager moved to let the animal out the redhead cased the living room swiftly. This was it—the same shag wall-to-wall carpet, the same desk directly in front of him, the same sofa under the picture window to his right. All that was missing was the body with the broken neck and his unseen attacker, who had evi-

dently stood in the alcove behind the built-in bookcase to his left.

Then Fritz came loping out of the bedroom, whimpering with excitement, a black-and-tan Doberman with the traditional tawny oakleaf under his tail.

"It's okay, Fritz," said Delbas, and the dog circled the detective, sniffing but not nipping at his calves. When the inspection tour was finished, the detective crouched and rubbed his ears, causing the dog's tail to wag violently.

"I see you know how to handle him," the manager said.

"I've hunted with these fellows," the detective replied. "They're marvelous animals, and this is a good one."

"He ought to be. He cost enough. Mrs. Ranney gave him to me. She thought I needed a watchdog."

The deepset eyes reflected inner amusement at the thought. The detective, who had been crouching to meet Fritz at eye-level, rose and said, "What can you tell me about young MacLean, Mr. Delbas?"

"Sit down." Delbas leaned against the desk, Fritz settling at his side, while the redhead perched on the sofa.

Then the manager said, "MacLean's like a lot of rich kids, I guess. Thinks he owns the world or ought to. Girl

crazy, gun crazy, car crazy. Got a big thing for Pat Ranney. Can't say I blame her mother for worrying. A kid like that can make alot of trouble before he grows up—if he ever does."

The detective nodded, then said, "I understand his family cut him off over a year ago. How does he pay his rent? I assume apartments here aren't cheap."

"They aren't," Delbas replied, scratching the overlap of his stomach. "But I'm only the manager. As long as the rent gets paid on time, I don't ask questions."

Shayne felt as if a curtain had dropped. Either Delbas knew nothing more about Andrew MacLean or had no intention of saying anything further. Shayne decided to waste no more energy on this tack at this time. He thanked the big manager and asked him the location of apartment 21. It was in the upper southwest corner of the balcony-belted patio with its central planting of banana palms surrounded by a shallow pool in which swarms of goldfish swam.

Fritz saw him to the door politely. Delbas did not. Shayne was pondering this stalemate or repulse, not certain which it was, when Charlotte Ranney opened her apartment door in response to his ring.

Her figure appeared flawless beneath the jump-suit that covered it, the warm beige of the material making her light blue eyes even more brilliant than they had looked the day before in Shayne's office. She greeted him coolly, led him along a brief hallway, opulently carpeted, to a writing room equally opulent in pale green carpeting and cane-backed French Provincial.

Gesturing him to a surprisingly comfortable low-backed armchair, she seated herself diagonally across a fluted coffee table, said, "I'm glad you finally made it, Mr. Shayne."

Ignoring the reproof in the *finally*, he said, "I was here yesterday, Mrs. Ranney. In fact, I got here early."

"Then why—" she began, hesitated, added, "I expected Tony to send you up here."

"Would you describe Anthony Delbas for me," he said. "Is he a thin little man with high cheekbones?"

The blue eyes vanished behind a slow blink. Disbelief curled the beautifully made-up lips. "Tony? Oh, *no!* He's as big as houses and has a weight problem."

"Then it couldn't have been him lying on the carpet in apartment two with his neck broken." It was time for shock tactics.

IV.

DISBELIEF FADED and became alarm in the aqua eyes. The voice hardened. "Is this some sort of put-on, Shayne, because, if it is..."

"It is no put-on, Mrs. Ranney. I saw that man lying there, but not for long. Somebody clobbered me and I came to in a hospital."

"Oh, my God!" the attractively boned face went white, "Did you say 'thin little man?'"

Shayne nodded, said, "I didn't have much time to look him over. Any idea who he was?"

The full lips compressed, the aqua eyes became opaque. She said, "Do the police know about this?"

"They know I was clobbered," he replied. "Mrs. Ranney, I don't think you've been honest with me. When the hospital bill is paid, I'll be most happy to return the balance of the retainer you handed me yesterday."

Alarm signals brightened the light blue eyes again. She extended a hand across the table to grip his knee—hard. "Oh, no, Mr. Shayne! I need you more than ever now."

"To investigate the source of income of a former J.D. named Andrew MacLean?" he asked. He had been bluffing about quitting the case and it was paying off. Wild horses could

not have made him withdraw now that he had a personal stake in it, a fact of which his head reminded him with another brief spell of dizziness.

"Mr. Shayne. . ." she began.

"You might as well call me Mike," he said.

"All right, Mike—and please call me Charlotte. I *do* want to know where Andrew gets his money from. Oh dear, it's so *damned* difficult. You see, when a girl's as attractive as Pat, it's hard to believe a boy would court her from ulterior motives—but there's no way of making sure."

"Unless I find out somebody's staking him to make it with her," said the detective.

"Even then," she said, adding a four-letter expletive that suggested the toughness beneath her sleek exterior.

"According to my sources, you retired with quite a bundle," he told her.

"I was very lucky." She made no attempt to duck the implications of his remark, and he liked her for that.

"And evidently very shrewd as well," he suggested. "Mrs. Ranney — Charlotte — what makes you believe my sources of information are any better than yours, at least as far as Andrew MacLean is concerned?"

"Because I've tried all mine and got nowhere. It's as if

somebody lowered a curtain. That's what scares me a lot more than the hardware Andy carries."

"It's not so easy, is it?" he suggested.

She shook her dark red head, her lips compressing to a line. "No, it's not," she admitted. "I thought I had it made when I retired and settled here and brought the girls home from school. But every so often something would crop up. . ." She let it hang.

"Like having Lou Barling pull you in on a false soliciting charge last year?"

The aqua eyes went green with cold fury, but the voice remained steady as she said, "That was a real low blow. Even with all the influence I possess, although I was able to get it quashed, there was no way to clear my record without going to court and having it get in the papers. And I could hardly afford that."

One small puzzle solved, he thought. Too many remained. He said, "Also, you got Barling busted off the force."

She shrugged it away. "He had it coming. He was a fanatic on the subject of prostitution. I was told he made some kind of vow to bring me down and he didn't quit even after I got out of the game."

"There are cops like that,"

said Shayne. "A few of them feel the same way about private eyes."

"So I've heard."

"Not many, thank God," said the redhead. Then, as a sudden hunch gripped him, "Charlotte, would you mind describing Lou Barling?"

"I don't see why not," she said. "After all, you can get his description from plenty of other sources. He was a thin, sallow little man without any significant features apart from his wide cheekbones."

The moment she said it, Charlotte Ranney froze, her eyes locked with Shayne's "Oh, my God!" she exclaimed again. Then, defensively, "Millions of men must answer that description."

"But you don't believe it, do you?"

She shook her head, lips compressed, said, "But what *happened* to him?"

"Unless we're both off base, he's dead," the redhead told her.

"But what's happened to him since?" she asked. "And why was he killed—here in Tony's apartment? And where's the body?"

"Those," Shayne replied, "are a couple of the sixty-four-thousand-dollar questions we've got to come up with the answers to—and damned fast if

you don't want the police *and* the press *and* the TV cameras turning your nice sheltered life inside out and upside down."

"Now you begin to see why I need you, Mike," said the woman. She rose and crossed to an exquisite inlaid light-wood secretary, opened a small drawer, pulled out a flat handpurse, opened it.

He motioned her to put it away, said, "There's no need, Charlotte. You'll get my bill when this is over—and until then, unless I need a large amount of cash, forget it."

"A bonus for what you've been through," she suggested.

"Don't worry," Shayne told her, "That will be included." He stood up, pondered for a moment while she put the purse away and locked the drawer, then said, "Is there any reason why anybody should be after you—like right now?"

She shook her head, frowning. "I can't think of any. Oh, I suppose I've made enemies—even though I bent over backward not to while I was—while I had my business. But apart from Lou Barling, and he's—*was*—a sort of nut..." It was her turn to let it hang.

Shayne felt quite certain she was withholding something but sensed, as with the manager, Tony Delbas, downstairs, that this was no time to ask.

He said, "I might as well get busy."

"What are you going to do?"

"What you asked me to—dig into Andrew MacLean. If somebody is staking him to court your daughter, I want to know who—and why."

"I wonder—" she began, again frowning. A bell chimed then and she said, "Oh, *damn!* I wonder who *that* is."

Quickly but gracefully, she moved to answer it. Shayne followed her into the hallway, keeping his distance and staying in the shadows. A man stood on the balcony outside the front door when she opened it. In his arms, he carried a heavy carton, supporting it with his right forearm underneath and steadying it with his left hand.

He said, "Hi, honey. Here they are."

She said, "My God, dear! I don't have room in the freezer for *that* much."

"They'll keep in the fridge till tonight" he assured her.

She turned to look at Shayne, said, "Excuse me, Mike. I'm needed in the kitchen." Then, as if by afterthought, "Why don't you come to dinner? We're going to barbecue about two dozen steaks. The kids will be here and I want you to meet them."

Shayne said, "*Great!*" and moved to the front door as



Charlotte followed the newcomer down a hall in the other direction.

As the man pushed open a swinging door at its end with his back, the detective saw this right arm, under the big heavy carton, ended in a leather-covered stump at the wrist.

He let himself out alone. He caught sight of no one save a glimpse of some children romping in the pool behind the patio as he left the pink stucco building and returned to his car.

Behind the wheel, he was gripped with another attack of weakness. There was little of the dizzy sensation and he

realized its primary spur was hunger. He had not eaten in twenty-four hours and mere mention of the word *steaks* had evidently triggered the attack.

He recalled a chophouse he had heard of not far from Merritt Crescent and drove there, hoping against hope they were open in the afternoon. It proved to be a pleasant looking pseudo-English tavern, virtually empty save for the inevitable horse players at the bar. He sat alone in a naugahide banquette and ordered a blood-rare top sirloin with all the fixings he could think of. He doubted that it would spoil his appetite for dinner.

He was well along with it when he became aware that he was no longer alone. Glancing upward, he saw a young man standing alongside the table. He was well tanned with shoulder length sunstreaked dark-blond hair, clad in dark shades, a horse-blanket tweed sports jacket and flared slacks. He kept the jacket buttoned, which reminded the redhead that beneath the fabric might be a handgun in a belt-clip holster—perhaps the snub-nosed Webley described by Charlotte Ranney in his office during their first meeting.

Washing down his food with a glass of Martell and water, he gestured the newcomer to sit,

down, said, "I'm afraid you'll have to wait till I finish, MacLean. I'm famished."

As he obeyed, the young man said, "I'm afraid my business can't wait, Shayne. My principal wants to see you right now."

He had laid his left hand flat on the banquette table while, with his right, he made a move to unbutton his jacket. Shayne moved like the jungle cat he could be when he had to, bringing his fork down, points first, onto the nerve center in the middle of the hand on the table. All four tines punched through the flesh, causing the young man to grunt and bring up his right hand, empty, in a desperate effort to halt the torture.

Shayne caught it by the wrist, said barely above a whisper. "Now put your right hand down—*flat!*"

When the young man had obeyed, his forehead already beaded with sweat. Shayne relieved him of his pistol by ripping open the tweed jacket and extracting it from its belt-clip in a single swift gesture. Only when he was back in his place did he pull the fork tines from Andrew MacLean's left hand.

"Now shut while I finish my lunch," he said and went back to his steak with the Webley thrust into his own waistband, minus its holster.

At least a half-dozen times, while the detective devoured his meal to the last drop, MacLean opened his mouth to speak. Each time, Shayne silenced him with a look and he resumed gripping his injured hand, now bound in a handkerchief, with the fingers of the other.

Not until he had cleaned his sizable sizzling platter and paid the check with a sizable tip for the waitress, did Shayne lean back and eye the intruder openly.

"Mr. Shayne..." the young man began, almost stuttering in nervousness, pain and embarrassment.

"You say your principal wants to see me?" said the redhead affably. "Let's go."

V

MACLEAN LED HIM to a low-slung imported sports car parked alongside the redhead's Buick. Mike Shayne motioned the cowed youth to stand aside after he had unlocked the door. The detective then reached under the dashboard and drew a sawed-off shotgun from its special rack. Holding it against his thigh, he motioned MacLean to get behind the wheel.

"You lead the way," he said, dropped the weapon into the luggage compartment of his

own car and laid the Webley beside it before slamming down the cover. Though he had no doubt of his ability to handle a deflated Andrew MacLean, he felt no desire for a needless fracas.

While stopped by a traffic light, Shayne drew his own .45 automatic from its dashboard concealment and slid it into his belt. MacLean led him back into town to a small modern office building that bore the legend PORTMAN ENTERPRISES above its plate-glass and stainless-steel front entrance. They parked in a half-filled lot in back and the younger man led the detective inside.

A comely blonde receptionist greeted them with a pleasant smile and said, "Mr. Portman is waiting to see you, Mr. MacLean."

Linus Portman rose from behind a huge walnut desk as they entered his huge walnut lined office. He greeted Shayne with a warm smile and offered a well manicured hand.

"Thanks, Andy," he said to MacLean. Then, "What happened to your hand?"

MacLean's face turned cherry red beneath its tan. He muttered, "It's nothing—a small accident."

"Better get it tended to right away," said Portman.

Having thus dismissed the boy, he gestured the detective to a tan leather armchair, shook his head and said, "What happened, Mike?"

Shayne told him. Portman shook his bald head, sighed, said, "These damn fool kids. I didn't tell him to..." A pause, then, "May I offer you a drink?" Portman nodded toward a well stocked portable bar in a far corner of the big room.

"Why not?" said Shayne.

"Martell, isn't it, Mike?" He moved toward the bar, turned to say, "I'm well acquainted with the Shayne legend."

All very easy, very pleasant. As Portman busied himself with bottles, ice and glasses, Shayne studied him, seeking to collate what he knew of this supposedly respectable and highly successful businessman.

Standing less than an inch under six feet, Linus Portman was massive of build—not fat but solidly thick. The near-total absence of hair on his head was compensated for by the beetling black density of his eyebrows. He radiated power and the genial bonhomie of a cannibal crab.

Shayne had heard of Linus Portman as a dealer in just about anything—minor league oil properties on the Gulf Coast, electrical equipment to backward new African republics,

discarded obsolete urban buses to small overpopulated tropical nations. If gushers failed to come in, if transformers failed to carry current, if buses quickly fell apart on unpaved dirt roads, it was no skin off Portman's hide.

He was the kind of dealer who got in fast and got out faster—with a profit—before the sad final returns were in. Although he and Shayne had met casually more than once, they moved in different orbits.

Regarding him thoughtfully as he brought the drinks, Shayne wondered how, when and where their orbits were in conjunction now. Almost certainly through Charlotte Ranney, of course. He wondered what the retired call-house operator could possibly have that Portman could want.

Perched on a corner of his big desk, Portman lifted his glass, said, "Cheers!" He radiated good fellowship, chuckled after a large swallow, said, "I suppose you're wondering why I sent the boy after you."

"It has entered my mind."

"It seemed the easiest way to contact you, Mike, since you're working for Charlotte Ranney and he's close to the household. I'm sorry if he tried to play rough. That wasn't in the game plan. He should have known better."

"He does now," said the redhead, savoring his drink. "So what's the game?"

"Mike," Portman said, "we're both men of the world. I'm sure you know what business Charlotte was in. Believe me, it was strictly first class. I should know. I was one of her best clients for years."

"I've heard."

"Well, don't underrate her, Mike." A pause for another swallow, then, "A lot more than sex was conducted under her roof. I've held some very important meetings there, closed a lot of confidential deals. So have a number of other men whose names might surprise you."

"Possibly," said the detective.

"Charlotte's place offered absolute privacy as well as diversion, Mike," Portman went on. "Or so I believed until six months ago."

Here it comes, Mike Shayne thought.

"A certain member of the household approached me with the information that all of these confidential meetings were bugged. Now, my record is as clean as the next man's but, in my kind of business, occasional crises do arise that demand emergency measures that might skirt the edge of formal legality. I'm sure you follow me."

"I do," said Shayne. "So you paid for the tapes and they kept coming back for more. You set up young MacLean as Pat Ranney's boyfriend when his family kicked him out, and the kid has failed. Right?"

"As far as you go," said the heavy-set man. "If that were all, I'd kiss it off and take my chances. But recently, I got another offer—the tapes on a business competitor. It came when a certain deal was on the verge of turning sour. At the time, I welcomed it. Then I began to think that the same party might be selling the same sort of information about *me* to my competitors. And that's when I began to sweat blood. *That's* when I set Andy up—he and the girl already knew each other."

"Why not have it out with Charlotte?" the redhead asked Portman.

"Because she's not supposed to be in on it—and I, for one, believe it. If I approach her, the whole gruesome bit is turned over to the Feds. And that I *don't* want."

"So what do you want *me* to do?" Shayne stood up.

"You're inside now. Sniff around and let me know if there's a way to get at the damned tapes. I'll pay you ten grand—win, lose or draw. Half now, half when it's over. How

does that sound? You play your case straight but keep me in mind."

Shayne said, "Did you ever hear of a man named Lou Barling?"

Portman shook his massive head, said, "Should I have?"

"Not necessarily—but you will when I find him," the detective replied. "By the way, who's selling you the tapes?"

"Believe it or not, I don't know—and that idiot kid hasn't found out. Whoever it is conducts his business entirely by telephone and the mail." Portman put down his glass on the desk blotter, smiled, said, "Then you're with me, Mike?"

Shayne shook his red head, reached for a cigaret. "Sorry, Portman," he said, "I'm only equipped to handle one client at a time. Right now, I'm Charlotte's man."

"You could do a hell of a lot worse." At least the wheeler-dealer was shrewd enough to recognize defeat and not press him further. Shayne almost liked him for that.

At the door, he turned and said, "Portman, you know I could charge that kid with attempted kidnapping and armed assault. And he'd talk."

"But you won't," said Portman, still smiling.

"Not *this* time," the detective promised. "But keep him off my

back. I've got enough problems without *him*."

The redhead returned to his office, where Lucy Hamilton greeted him solicitously—it seemed Tim Rourke had informed her that he had been knocked out the night before.

"Here I've been half-sick with worry about you, and you walk in smelling like a distillery," she complained.

"Purely medicinal," he replied. "What's on Tim's mind?"

"He wants you to call him at the office. Says he has some information about that Charlotte Ranney you might want to have."

"Okay, Angel, call him back."

"Michael, that woman is bad news. I felt it right away when she walked in here."

"So I gathered." Shayne spoke drily. "But I never drop a client till a case is closed. You ought to know that by now, Angel."

"I know." She sighed, reached for the telephone, paused to add, "Oh, and Len Sturgis called."

"What did *he* want?"

"He seemed to be fishing. He got huffy when I couldn't tell him anything."

"Poor baby," he said, sitting on the edge of her desk and reaching for the phone as she completed the call to the *Daily News* city room. Lucy sniffed as

she handed it to him and he returned a broad wink.

"Mike," said Rourke, "I've been doing a little checking on Charlotte Ranney since our last talk. Are you still interested?"

"Let's hear it, Tim. I'm interested."

"For one thing, she owns the Merritt Crescent apartment house lock, stock and barrel—along with some other choice bits and pieces of real estate in that part of town. Enough to keep you in Cognac and me in whiskey for the rest of our lives ten times over."

"Keep talking, Tim," said Shayne.

"Another thing," the reporter said, "when she retired from business three years ago, she moved her two daughters in with her—they were in boarding schools until then. The word is, they're both knockouts."

"I have yet to meet them," said Shayne. "Tim, what about a character named Delbas—Anthony Delbas? Did you get a make on him?"

"He's been with her for years," the reporter replied. "Used to be the doorman-bouncer-you name it. He lives there, too. Served a manslaughter rap in New York State for beating some bastard to death."

"I'll buy that," said Shayne. "Anything else? The girls must have had a father."

"He lives in the building, too," said Rourke. Name's Ed Grey. He and Charlotte were divorced a few years ago. Seems he walked out on her."

"What brought him back?"

"Hell, who knows? She's supposed to be damned attractive. And there are the two kids. Grey seems to have been a drifter type. He got banged up in a car accident in California and lost a hand. That could be it. Anyway, that's all for now. I hope it helps."

"That's fine, Tim. Thanks."

"Don't forget to give me the story first," said the reporter.

"I won't," Shayne assured him. "By the way, you might ask around about Lou Barling."

"The ex-Vice cop? What about him?"

"I'd like to know what he's up to, if anyone's seen him around the last day or two."

"You don't want much, do you?" Rourke sounded put-upon but the detective knew he'd ask. The hell of it was, Shayne reflected as he returned the phone to its cradle, there was nothing to go on as far as the body on the carpet was concerned. If he took it to Len Sturgis now and no body turned up. . .

The thought was too damned embarrassing to bear contemplation. He glowered at the phone until Lucy came in and

reminded him it was time to close up for the day. Then he went home to his apartment, showered and changed his clothes. There was nothing about Barling being missing on the early evening news, so after a long and leisurely highball, he took off again for the apartment house on Merritt Crescent.

VI

AS HE PARKED in front of the building, Mike Shayne heard a dog barking somewhere. Fritz, of course—and that was another missing piece in the jigsaw puzzle beginning to assemble in his mind. There had been neither sight nor sound of Delbas's Doberman during the brief conscious span of his first visit to apartment two.

Where had the dog been then? A piece of the puzzle, all right, but where did it fit?

The early twilight was warm and delightful as the redhead entered the palm-planted patio with its goldfish pool and the atmosphere was festive. There were brightly clad people on the balcony above him, the music of Cole Porter was in the air and the smell of barbecued beefsteak sweetly assailed his nostrils and stirred his appetite.

Yet, for some reason, he felt

a presentiment of danger and his right hand moved by reflex toward the heavy automatic pistol in its shoulder rig behind his left lapel. But of course neither rig nor pistol was there. An informal party like this was hardly the occasion for donning such equipment. He had left them locked in the special compartment in his car.

He hesitated, tempted to retrace his steps and put them on, again decided against it. Feeling curiously naked, he went on up the balcony steps. Behind him, he heard Fritz barking again.

Tony Delbas, looking like a latter-day Colossus of Rhodes stood at the top of the iron staircase in powder blue slacks and a flamboyant sports shirt that made him seem even larger and heavier than life. He regarded the detective sardonically, said, "Got it all wrapped up, Mr. Shayne?"

The detective shrugged non-committally as the sound of his master's voice caused Fritz to indulge in a fit of renewed barking.

Delbas said, "Poor mutt—he's crazy to get at those steaks. Charlotte's expecting you."

She greeted him just inside the apartment door, looking ravishing in a splashy flowered silk outfit—culottes, halter and bolero jacket that revealed the

satin-smooth skin of her naked midriff.

She led him into a large room, full of people, that looked out onto a broad balcony on which the redhead could see, hear and smell the sizzling steaks cooking on a brace of big barbecues. Behind a well equipped bar backed by a big blithering kitchen stood a handsome young man busy with cocktail shaker and glasses.

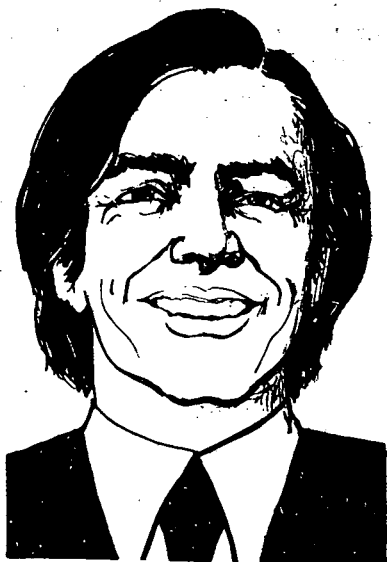
"Spike," she said, "here's an easy one. He drinks Martell and water. Mike Shayne—Spike Wainwright."

"Hi, Mike." The youth grinned easily as he decanted a foaming lemon-hued brew from the shaker into a row of salt-ringed cocktail glasses without spilling a drop. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Nothing good, I hope," the detective managed.

"I expected better than that from you," Wainwright said as he mixed Shayne's drink and pushed it toward him. There was an engaging quality in his insolence the detective rather liked.

A lissom young brunette moved up to say, "Spike, darling, five more Margaritas and one dry-dry martini with twist." Having delivered the message, she turned to eye Shayne frankly and add, "You must be mother's detective per-



son. I'm Cathy and this is Spike."

"We just met," the young man spoke without looking up from his drink mixing, then said, "I adore Charlotte, baby, but if she must throw surprise parties, I wish she'd either have fewer people or give me time to get help. I'm too busy to have any fun."

"What's the occasion anyway?" Shayne asked the girl.

"There isn't any," Cathy Ranney replied. "Or if there is, it's because Tony's big freezer broke down and the steaks had to be cooked tonight or spoil." Then, to Spike, "I'll get Tony to spell you. Since his freezer's re-

sponsible, he ought to do some of the dirty work."

Shayne was digesting this nugget of news when she beckoned to a passing ash-blond who might have been her twin save for the color of her hair and her eyes, which were blue. "Mike," she said, "this is my sister Pat—Mike Shayne."

"The detective?" Pat asked. Her blue eyes widened. "How interesting!" Then, shaking her head, "I'm not going to ask how you and mother met. She knows everybody—almost."

The redhead sensed ambiguity in the statement but let it pass—this seemed hardly the moment or place to dig into what Pat knew of her mother's past. Besides, he liked the girl—liked both girls—and embarrassing them was hardly part of his assignment.

Having met them, he could understand Charlotte's inability to believe any young man could come a'courting either of her daughters for purely ulterior reasons. They were damned attractive young women.

The wonder was, to Shayne, that a girl with Pat Ranney's charm and looks should go for an unstable young character like Andrew MacLean. But he had long since given up trying the fathom any woman's choice in males.

Almost as if she could read

his thoughts, Cathy, who had turned away from them, turned back and said, "What's the matter with Andy's hand? He's got it all bandaged up."

"He banged it on something, poor lamb," said Pat. She greeted the detective with open curiosity but no sign of resentment. By this, Shayne judged that she was unaware of his involvement in her love life. She, too, drifted off and he went in search of his client.

He found her on the long, roomy private balcony, which overlooked the swimming pool, talking to her ex-husband, Ed Grey. Wearing white apron and chef's cap, he was turning a small army of magnificent looking top sirloin strippers over glowing coals with great dexterity, flipping the rapidly charring meat over with a long-pronged fork and tossing those that were ready into a silver plated bin which, in turn, was warmed from beneath by a slow fire.

Now and then, he prodded an errant sirloin into place with the stump of his right wrist, which was protected by its leather cover. He looked serious about his work and his lined face was slightly sad in repose.

Spotting Shayne, Charlotte Ranney said, "Good! I see Spike took care of your drink." Then she introduce him to Ed Grey,

adding, "Ed and I used to be married. He's the girls' father."

"You can both be proud of them," said Shayne sincerely. "They're good looking kids."

"Headaches at times—but aren't they all?" said Charlotte.

"You can say *that* again, dear!" said her ex-husband. "That klutz Pat's in love with—I see he managed to hurt his hand. He's always getting banged up."

"You can't resent him for *that*, hon," she said.

"I reserve the right to resent where, what and whom I choose." The one-handed man paused to look at Shayne and send a flickering wink in his direction. The detective eased away as they continued their amiable bickering, wondering why it was that so many couples who could not make it married manage to achieve a loving relationship after getting divorced.

Of course, he thought, being married to Charlotte while she was in business must have presented special problems. He eased back into the living room and spotted Andy MacLean at its other end with his left hand swathed in bandages. MacLean spotted the redhead at the same moment and, after staring at him wide-eyed for a moment, evaporated into the growing mob scene.

There, Shayne decided, was a real hot dog. In his estimation, anyone who made such a fuss over four little forkpricks was not deserving of the sympathy he was evidently seeking.

He noted that the towering Tony Delbas had replaced young Wainwright behind the bar and was dispensing drinks with the swift efficiency of a professional. A voice greeting him by name from behind all but made him spill his own drink.

Linus Portman stood there, glass in hand, smiling up at him above a sports jacket that looked as if it must shine in the dark. He said, "Who was it that remarked, 'Into each life a little Shayne must fall'?"

The redhead flinched, then said, "Nobody we know—I hope. Keeping an eye on the boy, Portman?"

"Hell, no!" the promoter replied. "Didn't you see him duck when he spotted me just now?"

"I thought he was ducking *me*!" the detective replied.

Portman said, "Who knows? Damn fool kid!" Then, "I thought I told you Charlotte and I are old friends."

"You did at that," said Shayne.

The conversation was terminated when Charlotte appeared in the balcony doorway and said, "Come and get it!"

There was a mass move toward the barbecue beyond. Shayne himself was ravenous, thanks to the appetite-inflating smell of the blend of meat and sauce. But he decided to put it off for a bit. Cathy Ranney's remark about the breakdown of big Tony's freezer had triggered a new train of investigative thinking.

Apart from the person or persons who had disposed of the unfortunate Lou Barling, he was the only one who knew the erstwhile Vice cop was dead. He was also aware of the difficulty of disposing of a body without leaving any traces. Even if whoever killed him had taken his corpse to sea and fed it to the sharks, there would almost inevitably be some witnesses to the transportation by car to a boat.

On the other hand, if Delbas's freezer had not broken down—granted it was well stocked—concealment of a cadaver in its limited space would mean removal of much of its contents—and the current barbecue had been hastily assembled to keep the prime beef from spoiling.

He glanced at the bar, saw Delbas was still there at work, then slipped from the apartment. It was growing dark rapidly outside and Shayne did not know exactly what he was

going to do—but he wanted a sniff at apartment two. He only hoped Fritz would not raise too much of an uproar.

VII

IN THE DEEPENING dusk, the door to the manager's apartment looked blandly innocent. Mike Shayne stared at it with mounting frustration. His every instinct told him that, behind its smooth surface, lay the solution at least to the problem of Lou Barling's death and disappearance. From above, the sounds of amiable revelry drifted down to him on a gentle breeze.

But the door was solid. If he broke it open, it would make a hell of a noise—and he was not yet ready to crack things wide open. He simply didn't know enough to wade in and damn the consequences. Feeling utterly futile, he gave it a poke with a clenched fist, expecting to hear the eruption of Fritz barking up a storm.

But no sound came from within—and the door gave under the relatively mild push of his knuckles. It was not only unlocked, it was unlatched.

Shayne stood there for a moment, staring at it while he hastily reassembled his thinking, assaying the situation. If

someone had deliberately left it open to entry, why?

Whoever it was could hardly have done so, so that the red-head could walk in. He had given no one a hint that he intended to snoop around. And what had happened to the Doberman?

Shayne's first impulse was to go out to his car and arm himself. But another possibility suggested that, in doing so, he might lose precious opportunity. Whoever had left the manager's door open might have done so because an imminent return was in the cards.

It would take Shayne precious minutes to get to the Buick parked outside, to unlock it, to don harness and gun, to return. By then, the door might be again locked.

Thinking, *Well, here goes nothing*, he gave the door another push and stepped silently inside, closing it as quietly behind him. There was no light on within but enough of the twilight remained so that he could see fairly well. He took a deep breath and looked around the living room.

Nobody and nothing. . .

Shayne wished he had a ground-plan of the apartment in his head as he began to search the pad. The first door he tried opened into the bedroom, with the white porcelain

tiles of a bathroom glimmering beyond. Delbas was neat—he had to grant him that. The bed was made, the big man's clothes were carefully hung in the wardrobe closet that took up an entire wall.

The redhead retreated and found the kitchen. It, too, looked empty of anything out of place. He opened another door, found himself in a broom closet. The third door he tried, he finally hit pay dirt. It was a smallish room, probably a kitchen pantry, half filled with a bulky white freezer. A lump on the floor proved to be Fritz, lying on his side and looking pitifully small and helpless.

At first, the detective thought the dog was dead, but the sound of heavy breathing indicated that Fritz had been drugged. He recalled hearing Fritz's bark when he entered the building less than an hour earlier. Whatever had happened in here had happened very recently.

Poor bloody pup! he thought. Shayne, who loved dogs, felt like murdering whoever had done this to the Doberman with his bare hands.

He stepped around the unconscious animal and opened the freezer door. It was empty. Whatever had displaced the steaks had been removed. Shayne was on the verge of ut-

tering a four-letter word aloud when he heard the sound of soft footsteps in the front room.

If whoever it was were armed and came in here, he was trapped. He felt the hair on the back of his neck stiffen, cursed the decision not to go and get his .45 Colt.

Where to hide?

There was only one possible cover. The big freezer did not quite fill the wall space against which it was set. On the side away from the door was a narrow alcove into which he might possibly squeeze.

As he forced himself into it, holding his breath, he was glad he had not armed himself. Had he been wearing his shoulder rig, he would never have made it. He pushed himself as far out of sight as he could—and waited.

There was an exchange of words outside the room so soft-pitched that he could recognize no meaning. Then he heard footsteps approaching the door of the converted pantry and again held his breath. There was brief silence and then the door of the room was slammed shut. He waited until the silence again grew oppressive, then went to the door and turned the knob. It remained shut.

This time, the redhead had no compunction about busting

it open. Standing before it sideways, he gave it a series of hard swings with the side of his rump. On the third blow, it opened with a splintering sound indicating that the lock had been forced through the jamb.

Delbas's pad was once again deserted save for Shayne himself and the drugged Doberman. He moved cautiously in case the recent visitors were still lurking outside. Then he went out to the street and reclaimed his gun and harness. He had discovered one fact when he looked inside the big freezer.

It was in perfect working order.

He longed to have someone call a vet for the dog but to do so would reveal the fact that he had visited the ground floor apartment. Back in Charlotte's party, he felt his frustration rise again. In such a press of people, how could he determine who, if anyone, had been missing?

A good question—but one that he had to answer somehow if he were going to discover what had happened. The gathering sounded amiable enough, but to the detective, the occasion had taken on a sinister tinge. Somewhere within its radius, he felt certain, a killer or killers lurked. One-by one, he set out to assay the suspects he had.

The list was formidable. As possible killers of Lou Barling he had Tony Delbas, Ed Grey, Andrew MacLean—nor did he rule out as secondary prospects Linus Portman and Spike Wainwright. Combinations were not only possible but probably, since the background was beginning to take shape as conspiracy and counter-conspiracy to use Charlotte's tapes for blackmail purposes and Linus Portman's attempt to check this by having young MacLean infiltrate the Ranney household.

He sensed that there was no time for adequate investigation if further crimes were to be prevented and the murderer—if it *was* murder—found. Therefore, he was going to have to bring pressure, preferably upon the weakest link in either conspiracy.

At this point, it looked like Andrew MacLean. Shayne had a fair hunch it was Andrew who had locked him in Tony Delbas's kitchen pantry. While he had not been able to hear the words uttered by his prisoner, he had caught a grainy timbre that reminded him of the voice of the youth who had accosted him in the restaurant that afternoon.

There had been more of spite than deadly intent in the useless gesture of slamming the

door on him. Which brought up two other questions—how had MacLean known Shayne was there, and who had been his companion?

The redhead had a pretty good idea but no way to prove it. No, he would have to put pressure on the erratic young man.

He spotted Pat Ranney close by, said, "Have you seen Andrew?"

"Not lately," She shook her lovely head. "I'm looking for him, too. Why—has he done something wrong?"

"I only want to ask him a couple of questions," Shayne assured her.

"If you find him, remind him we have a date to go to the Beach," she said.

Shayne promised, sensing inner tension in the girl that bespoke unhappiness. He added, "I shouldn't think you'd have any need to remind any young man of a date."

She smiled quickly—too quickly—thanked him, then shook her ash-blonde head. "I'm not sure about that," she replied. "Andy's been forgetful lately—as if his mind isn't where I want it to be—on me."

"Perhaps he has other worries," the detective suggested.

"If he has, why doesn't he tell me about them?" the girl countered. "I'd only like to help him.

After all, what's the use of liking somebody if you *can't* help?"

"Perhaps it's something he doesn't want you to know." Then, noting distress on the girl's pretty face, "He might be embarrassed to talk about it."

"Then why would he be so absent-minded? He didn't use to be. No, he's worried about something. And when he worries, so do I."

"I'm sorry," Shayne told her. "Perhaps, when I talk to him, I can root it out."

"He can be awfully secretive," she replied.

Shayne asked for MacLean's apartment number. Pat Ranney gave it to him, shook her head, then said, "He's *never* there unless it's with me."

"Okay," said Shayne, "but I'll have a look anyway."

Apartment 29 was in the opposite corner of the building, diagonally across the balconied courtyard from Charlotte Ranney's resident. It was dark, and the door locked. But a louvered window slightly to the left of the door was open. Thankful that the balcony was temporarily deserted, Shayne worked out four of the narrow panes and managed to slide inside, being nearly smothered by the drawn curtain in the process.

He turned on a light switch, looked around. The living room of the one-bedroom apartment

was empty, as were the bedroom and bath. The redhead felt frustration mount again.

While he was there, he decided, he might as well search the place—not that he expected to find anything unless the crazy kid had another firearm or two stashed about. He began operations in the bedroom but had barely got started when he heard the faint click of a key in the doorlock.

He moved to switch off the bedroom light but before he could reach it, big Tony Delbas filled the frame of the doorway.

"You son of a bitch!" he said to Shayne. "You drugged Fritz."

VIII

SHAYNE WENT FOR his gun. This, he sensed, was no time to argue his innocence. But the bigger man was too quick for him, was already charging with the berserk fury of an outraged dog-lover when he made his accusation.

Like any veteran resort bouncer, his first move was preventive rather than aimed at annihilation. His heavy arms clamped themselves around the redhead's torso at chest level, effectively blocking the detective's swift move to unholster his .45.

He swung Shayne around so that his back was to his assail-

ant and tightened his grip still further. The redhead had to bite his lips to keep from crying out as the pressure caused his holstered gun to dig into the left side of his chest. So great was the sudden pain that he almost passed out and, for a moment, thought that his ribs would snap.

In vain, he tried to drive an elbow into Tony Delbas's ribs, hoping to knock his wind out and weaken him temporarily so that he could get out of that crushing bear-hug from behind. But the bigger man simply squeezed a bit harder. Shayne had managed to fill his lungs with air before the pressure tightened, thus retaining a brief further hold on consciousness. He knew he was in a bad way, was going to have to do something to turn the tables before he blacked out. . .

He lowered his head, straining to pull clear, out of the corner of an eye caught sight of Delbas's large left foot almost alongside his own. The former bouncer was wearing tennis shoes while Shayne was shod in hard heels.

The redhead brought the left one down on Delbas's canvas foot cover with all the force he could muster, felt a satisfying crunch as he ground it around.

Delbas did not actually let go—but sudden agony forced



him to loosen his grip, and that was all the opportunity the detective needed. Flinging his arms upward and wide to get free, he spun rapidly, using the full weight of his body, backed by its pivoting motion, to drive his right fist deep into the huge building manager's overfat gut.

Delbas grunted and stopped dead, gasping for breath. The redhead spun the other way, bringing his left fist hard against his attacker's diaphragm, leaning on the punch. Delbas's wind left his lungs in a sharp exhalation and his already pale face went chalk white.

Shayne's immediate impulse was to polish him off, but reason caused him to step clear of the tottering human tower and draw the Colt from his shoulder rig. He leaned back against the bureau while Del-

bas sank slowly to a sitting position, holding onto his belly with both hands and uttering pitiful little gasping moans—pitiful coming from a man of such dimensions.

"You dirty bastard!" Delbas croaked, looking up at the red-head when he could speak. "Why'd you drug my dog?"

"I didn't," the detective told him. "I was there—but somebody beat me to it."

"Then why in hell didn't you say so?" Delbas asked, his voice returning to normal.

"Think, Tony," said Shayne. "Did you really give me a chance? You damn near killed me."

"You *did* kill me," said the former bouncer sheepishly. "I never thought I'd meet the man who could take me—outside of the ring."

He extended a hand for help to his feet. Shayne gave it warily, covering him with the automatic held well away while he did so. Even so, there was a moment when he thought the giant was going to try again—but it passed and Delbas sat on the bed, rubbing his belly.

"If you didn't drug Fritz, who did?" he asked.

"Tony," said Shayne, "who told you I was here."

The big man frowned, shook his head. "I'm not. . ." he began. Then his expression cleared. "It

was Miss Pat," he added. "But that. . ." His voice tailed off and the frown returned.

"Here's another," said Shayne. "How come you left the party to go to your apartment?"

"Spike replaced me at the bar," he said. "I finally got myself something to eat. Mixing drinks always makes me hungry. Then Miss Pat gave me a bag of scraps and said why didn't I take them down to Fritz."

"Miss Pat—both times?" Shayne said.

"That's right. But *she* wouldn't hurt Fritz. She helped her mother and me pick him out at the kennel." A pause, then, "What in hell's going on around here, Mr. Shayne?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," said the detective. "Did you ever hear of a man named Lou Barling?"

"Barling? You mean the Vice cop who tried to set up Mrs. Ranney? What's *he* got to do with this?"

"Suppose you tell *me*," said the detective. "When I came out here yesterday, your door was open and Lou Barling was lying on your living room carpet—with his neck broken."

"You got to be kidding, Mister Shayne."

The redhead shook his head. "Where were you—and Fritz around quarter of six?"

"I walk him five-thirty to six," said the manager. "I give him his dinner, then take him around the neighborhood. It's the only exercise the poor fellow gets."

"What did you find when you got back?"

"Nothing," said Delbas. "Nobody and nothing. And the door was locked, the way I left it when I went out. These days it's not safe to leave a door open, even around here." He looked at Shayne with a pleading expression on his ugly face. "Honest, that's the truth."

"I believe you," said Shayne, "but we may have a tough time proving it. Somebody set you up—but good."

"I'm beginning to believe it. What can I do?"

"How come Charlotte asked me to talk to you about young Andrew?"

"Oh, I guess it's because, as manager, I see more of what he's up to. I was the one he showed his guns to."

"Okay, Tony," said Shayne. "Anything else you can think of to tell me?"

"I dunno," the giant replied, wrinkling his brow. "I wish I knew who'd want to set me up. All I've done is try to be a good manager for Mrs. Ranney."

"So do I," said the redhead, reading the doglike devotion in Tony's voice. "And that's what

we've got to find out before he beats us to the punch, I've got a hunch whoever it is wants us both out of the play." He paused to tug at an earlobe, putting his thoughts in sharp focus, added, "My ribs are going to be sore for a week."

"Not as sore as my foot—and my gut," the manager stopped to rub first his left tennis shoe, then his diaphragm. He looked at the detective, added, "Mr. Shayne, you got a punch like a mule."

Shayne slid his gun back into its holster. He had the former bouncer read now—dumb and devoted, a purely physical type. From somewhere, he remembered the old joke about the man who worked as a doorman outside a house of ill repute for ten years before finding out what went on upstairs.

He doubted that Delbas was quite that stupid—not quite. In the meantime, his course of action took on clarity in his mind.

"Tony," he said, "is there any way I can get to your apartment from here without being seen?"

Delbas's face cleared. "There's a drainpipe running down the corner of the house. My apartment is right underneath this one. You want me to shinny down it and climb in my kitchen window?" A look of doubt, then, "I'll have to bust

the window to get in—it's locked."

"Show me the pipe, Tony," said Shayne.

It was there, right alongside both kitchen windows. The red-head could reach it without difficulty. He was barely in time to keep the hulking manager from climbing down it.

"No, Tony," he said. "I want you to go to your apartment by the patio staircase."

"Anyone watching will see me," the giant protested.

"That's the idea," Shayne assured him. "Go back to your place and open the kitchen window so I can get in. I'll be there in exactly five minutes."

"But why...?" Delbas' brow furrowed. Then he shrugged and gave up, said, "Any way you want it, Mr. Shayne."

"And turn off the lights as you leave, Tony."

"Okay. See you downstairs." Again he paused, added, "What about Fritz? Should we get him to a vet?"

"The first moment we can," Shayne promised.

When he had gone, Shayne leaned out to study the drain-pipe, was pleased to discover it was almost completely masked from observation outside by a thick trunked royal palm. He counted to a hundred, then scrambled through the window, got a firm grip on the pipe and

shinnied down it, grateful that it was affixed to the wall by stout steel stanchions.

Delbas opened the lower window as he reached it and gave him a hand through. The detective was thankful he had not turned on the ceiling light. He did not believe he had been observed from outside and there was no point in giving away his presence here.

If Delbas *was* being set up, the manager's apartment had to be the focal point of the frame. It was here that, by arriving early on his first visit to Merritt Crescent, he had spotted the body of Larry Barling. It was here, if his suspicions proved right, that Barling's cadaver had been hidden in the supposedly broken-down freezer. It was here that Fritz had been drugged, here that he himself had been locked in the kitchen pantry by an unseen pursuer.

It was here, he suspected, that the next and perhaps the final move in the assigning of guilt to the manager must occur. Having admitted the detective, Tony Delbas busied himself with tending to the still unconscious Doberman. He had laid him out on a bath towel on the living room couch and bent over the animal, stroking his head and uttering soothing sounds. Thanks to the bright-

ness of the patio, there was no need to turn on the lights.

From the doorway, watching, the redhead said, "Tony, about your freezer breaking down. Has it ever happened before?"

"No, Mr. Shayne. I don't know what happened. I don't mess around with electric things. I got a hell of a shock once, trying to fix a toaster."

"Did you know it was fixed?" Shayne said.

Delbas looked up from the drugged Doberman. "No—when?"

"Sometime tonight."

"How come?" The manager sounded puzzled. "They told me over the phone they couldn't get a man over till tomorrow. That's why we had the barbecue—to keep all those steaks from spoiling."

"Somebody fixed it," said Shayne, "if it was ever out of order in the first place. May I take a look at it?"

"Why not, Mr. Shayne. Anyway, somebody busted the pantry door."

The redhead didn't waste time explaining how *that* had happened. He went through the shattered barrier, now hanging unevenly on its hinges, and lifted the latch on the white freezer door. As he pulled it toward him, the inside light came on to reveal that it was no longer empty.

Young Andrew MacLean had been jammed in there—and he was very dead.

IX

"POOR MR. ANDREW!" said Tony Delbas when Mike Shayne showed him the body. "He didn't mean any real harm. Now who would want to do a thing like that to him?"

Shayne did not answer. Young MacLean's neck had been broken by the same blunt agent that had extinguished the former Vice cop. Thanks to the chill inside the freezer, his hair, eyebrows and lashes were already frosting over. The detective closed the door, turned back to Delbas.

"Hell!" said the latter. "And here I was thinking bad of him for lying to me about you doping Fritz!"

"Hit me," said the detective.

"Huh?" said the hulking ex-bouncer.

"Hit me!" said Shayne. "Hard! In the face."

"Seems like everybody's gone crazy all at once," said Delbas. "Do you mean it, Mr. Shayne?"

"I mean it, Tony. Hard enough to make a quick bruise. Here—along the cheekbone."

"I don't want to hurt you, Mr. Shayne."

"For Pete's sake, belt me, Tony. There isn't time to explain."

"Okay—if that's what you want."

The manager clenched a massive right fist and delivered a roundhouse punch directly below the detective's left eye. Shayne rode with the blow but even so, for a moment, he felt as if his head had been torn loose.

"I didn't want to hurt you, Mr. Shayne." Delbas looked close to tears.

"It's okay," said Shayne. From somewhere in the distance, he heard the faint shrill of a police siren, quickly cut off and not repeated.

"Tony," he said, "no matter what happens, you're going to be okay. Remember that. Now, is there any other place in this building where a body could be hidden."

Delbas frowned as if thinking were actually painful. He shook his head, then said, "I dunno—unless it's in the storeroom. There's an old freezer there with all the other junk."

"How do I get in?" he said.

"There's a key."

"Give it to me—and *quick*, Tony. There isn't much time left, I fear." He had heard another quickly shut-off siren sound from much closer. The fact the police were not coming with their alarms on full indicated to him that their business

was serious, that they were making as little noise as impeding traffic permitted.

Tony Delbas got him the key. Shayne kissed it, stuck it in a pocket, scrambled halfway out the kitchen window, said, "No matter what, Tony—you haven't seen me since you beat me unconscious in Andrew's apartment."

"Since I *what*?"

"Have you got it?" The redhead persisted until the hulking manager repeated it after him and promised to stick to the story.

"Remember, Tony, this is for Mrs. Ranney and the girls. You'll be all right in a little while—and that's a promise."

"You're not setting me up, too?" Delbas looked pathetic. "I hear the cops coming."

"Only to get the so-and-so who did it—and who doped Fritz," the redhead promised. "Don't say more than you have to—and then you know what to say."

The redhead shinnied up the drainpipe, not a moment too soon. He was barely back in the murdered youth's apartment before he heard the braking of two police sedans in the street and the inevitable electronic-robot tones of dispatchers' voices coming in via their radios.

His clothing was nicely disheveled by the climb and he

made no effort to put it right. He remained where he was until he heard the low-keyed voices of officers in the patio downstairs. Then he left MacLean's apartment and moved to the balcony railing. He recognized the stocky form of Homicide Lieutenant Tom Phelan in the pink floodlights that lit up the palms and the goldfish pond.

He called down to him, "Hey, Tom, what the hell is going on around here?"

Startled, the lieutenant looked upward and spotted the untidy creature clinging to the balcony railing. He said, "Mike Shayne! What the devil are you doing here?"

The redhead walked slowly downstairs, as more police entered the building. They swarmed in and around apartment 2. Shayne moved away but Phelan, spotting him, said, "Hold it, Mike. Looks like we got us a killing." Then, peering at him closely in the uneven light, "What in hell happened to you?"

"I got clobbered," said the redhead.

"Who hit you?"

"He did." This with a nod toward the towering figure of Tony Delbas, who was in the act of being led out of his pad, handcuffed, by a pair of burly patrolmen.



The lieutenant's eyebrows rose beneath the brim of his uniform cap. He said, "Then it wasn't you who phoned in the tip about that big bastard?"

"How could I? I was unconscious. Who got killed?"

"Young fellow—name of MacLean. Neck broken with a single punch, it looks like. You got off lucky. What are you doing here?"

"Investigating a kid named Andrew MacLean," Shayne told him.

"Looks like you're out of a case, Mike."

Shayne nodded, said, "I'd like to talk to my client."

"Who is it?" Phelan asked.

"Mrs. Ranney—she owns the building." He nodded toward the stairway from the balcony. Charlotte Ranney was coming down alone, looking lovely as ever, her face a mask of distress and concern.

"I want to talk to her first," said the lieutenant. "You'd better wait upstairs with the others. I want to talk to you, too."

Shayne met his client at the foot of the stairs. She looked at his bruised cheek, which was swollen and beginning to hurt, said, "What happened to you, Mike? Are you okay?"

"I'm all right. The lieutenant wants to see you."

"About Tony?" And, when the redhead nodded, "I just can't believe it. Tony was like a faithful dog, a Saint Bernard. Loyal and gentle."

"Except to anyone who poses a threat to his mistress," said Shayne.

"We'll have to get him out of it," she said. Then, laying a hand on his wrist. "Don't go away, Mike."

"I won't," he promised.

He went up to apartment 21, where a pair of uniformed policemen were taking the names and addresses of the party guests before permitting them to depart. Linus Portman buttonholed Shayne in a corner.

"My God, Mike!" he

exclaimed, grabbing him by the arms with trembling fingers. "I feel like this is all my fault. I got the poor crazy kid into this."

Portman looked ashen beneath his tan. He was visibly shaken up. The redhead suspected he was close to tears. He said, "It's rough, Portman—but you mustn't blame yourself. I'm afraid the kid took his assignment a little *too* seriously. You can't knock yourself for that."

The promoter wasn't buying. He shook his head, said, "There's no way I can't. I gave him the job—and he winds up dead, murdered. How am I going to face his parents? They were so grateful when I took him on, thought having the job would keep him out of mischief. I've known them for years."

Shayne sympathized with the promoter. Portman's business ethics might not be the purest, but it was evident that he had personal scruples. The detective could not help approving even while he sympathized with the burly operator's plight.

He said, "Linus, it may not be much consolation, but I intend to nail the S. O. B. who did it."

"I thought he was already nailed," said Portman.

"He hasn't been convicted in court yet," Shayne replied. "And until he is..."

He let it hang as Portman moved away. The last of the other guests were departing, leaving only the two girls, Spike Wainwright and the one-handed Ed Grey in the big living room. Looking more lachrimose than ever, Grey got up from a sofa and went out on the private balcony, Shayne wondered why he did nothing to console his younger daughter, who was weeping silently in a corner with her sister consoling her.

As the redhead measured the scene, Spike Wainwright said, "Maybe I didn't have much use for Andy, but the poor bastard didn't deserve this."

Pat lifted her tear-stained face and said, "Andy was really sweet—underneath all that wildness. I wish you wouldn't talk him down, Spike. Not now, anyway."

"I wasn't talking him down," Wainwright replied. "I was only expressing—"

"Shut up, Spike!" said Cathy sharply. Beneath his tan, young Wainwright turned a fiery red.

The detective mixed himself a drink and walked out onto the private balcony. There, Ed Grey was rapidly disassembling the barbecue equipment. His deftness with both his one good hand and the leather-capped stump was remarkable.

Grey glanced up at the detec-

tive, noted the lump on his cheek, said, "Looks like you caught one, Mr. Shayne."

"Tony packs quite a punch," the redhead told him.

"You've been doing more catching than pitching in this one," Grey remarked.

"That's a regrettable truth." Shayne shrugged it off. He eyed the one-handed man, wondering what made him tick. Grey had returned to his self-assigned chore as if the detective were no longer there.

The redhead was pondering some other approach to this enigmatic character when Charlotte Ranney appeared in the doorway and said, "Mike, may I talk with you?"

X

THEY WENT TO the study where they had spoken earlier in the crowded day. She looked composed but he could sense the singing tautness of her nerves beneath the cool exterior.

"Mike," she said, "I don't like it. I don't like any of it."

"Are you speaking of young MacLean's murder or of my handling of the case?"

She gestured it off. "My God, not *you*! You've been hurt twice. I'm talking about what's been happening. I'd like to know what's going on around

here. Murder—two if you're right about Lou Barling."

"I am," said Shayne.

She shook her head, said, "And that's not all. I still can't believe Tony would do a thing like that. Sure, he's big and strong—but he's gentle. He had plenty of chances to play rough when he worked for me in the old business. But he never got rough, no matter how mean a drunken customer got. That's why I've kept him on."

"The murder of Barling might have been an accident, Charlotte," said the redhead. "A blow struck too hard—or Barling might have been weaker than he looked."

She hesitated before saying with doubt in her voice, "I guess I'll have to buy that. But what about Andy?"

"It could have been desperation—if the kid found out about the first murder and pressed him on it."

"That I *won't* buy," she insisted. "Mike, Tony trusts me implicitly. If he killed Lou Barling, he'd have *told* me about it. Even if he hadn't, I'd have known something was wrong. I can read him like a book. Besides—" she paused, frowned—"nobody heard Fritz bark. And he would have barked at an intruder, not to mention a fight. If you got here at quarter of six, Mike, Tony

wouldn't have been here. And that's why Fritz didn't bark. It was time for his walk. Neither he nor Tony were there. Don't you *see*?"

Shayne nodded, permitted himself a faint smile, said, "Thanks, Charlotte, you've cleared yourself nicely. I'm buying your story."

"But Tony beat you up," she protested. "I should think *you*, of all people—"

"Tony beat me up, as you put it, because I asked him to." He interrupted, keeping his voice low.

"You *what*?"

Softly, he explained what had happened between the apartment house manager and himself. Her face relaxed as he did so and she said, "Then Tony's not *really* arrested?"

"Oh, he's arrested, all right—it had to look real. It's up to us to see the pinch doesn't stick."

"Up to *us*?" she countered.

"Certainly. I want you to back me up, that's all, no matter who else gets hurt."

"Of course, Mike." A shadow troubled the lovely face. "But if what Tony told you is true, my own daughter, Pat, gave him the tips that..." She let it hang.

"Because Andy told her to," said Shayne. He must have caught onto the freezer bit on

his own. Or maybe his accomplice caught onto it. Remember, he was not alone when he locked me in the pantry. Fritz knew him and would not have barked at him, so it was easy to dope him. My guess is that he and his companion had moved Barling's body and were coming back to check before locking the place up once again.

"They probably saw me going in and wanted to find out what I was up to."

"Why slam the door?"

"That, I believe, was Andy's mistake, a childish one but fatal. He was sore at me for taking his guns away this afternoon. So he took it out in spite. My guess is, if he'd known I was unarmed, he'd have tried to stuff *me* in that damned freezer—with his accomplice to help, naturally." Shayne shrugged. "So he yielded to impulse and signed his own death warrant. The accomplice saw he was not to be trusted and decided to do away with him and frame Tony for everything."

"But why should he have Andy make the suggestions?" Charlotte Ranney asked.

"Why not? It helped set Tony up for a frame—and, if the accomplice then suggested there was unfinished business in apartment two, it meant Tony would be out of the way—so

they both went back there and Andy was murdered."

"But *why*?" Charlotte asked again. "Why would anyone want to commit murder?"

"You might ask Linus Portman about that," Shayne told her. "He was the one who set Andy up as a tenant in this building."

"*Linus*! But he's an old friend!"

"The remarkable thing about Linus is that he still *is* a friend."

"I don't understand." She looked at him helplessly.

"Do you know anything about making tapes of the business meetings where you used to work," Shayne asked.

"Of course," she replied. "But nobody else was supposed to. I was advised to have them made and hold them in case anything went wrong, so that I could bring pressure on certain important people if—well, if the police got too difficult. But I never had to use them."

She paused, then added, "I had them destroyed when I retired. I wish I'd had them with Lou Barling pulled his false arrest. I'd have been able to have my record cleared like *that*!"

Charlotte snapped her fingers, then looked at Shayne with a frown, said, "But how come you know about the tapes, Mike?"

He spelled it out for her—what Linus Portman had revealed that afternoon. It was Charlotte's turn to go ashen beneath her suntan as she listened. When he finished, she said, "I can't believe it!"

"But it's true."

She met his eyes for a long moment, then nodded and said, "But that explains why—"

The detective held up a hand for silence. Behind him and to his right, he had heard a soft whisper of sound that did not belong to the normal night noises. Putting a finger to his lips, he rose to his feet like a large cat, drawing his gun from the shoulder rig with the practiced ease of a sleight-of-hand artist.

Moving silently on the thick shag carpeting, Shayne crossed diagonally to the inner balcony french window, across which the drapes were drawn tight. He found the cord, pulled it, opening the curtains wide.

Evidently, he was not silent enough, for the balcony was empty though the sounds of soft running footsteps echoed gently on the air. The front door of the apartment slammed shut.

Shayne paused. He was in a dilemma. There were still policemen in and around the building and all he had to do to bring them running was to fire a shot in the air. But he had

the feeling that the double murderer inside might not hesitate to kill a third time—and this time the victim would inevitably be his client.

On the other hand, if he went back the way he had come out, he felt almost certain he'd be walking into a trap, for the killer would have circled into the room he had just left. He took a deep breath as he made up his mind. After all, Charlotte Ranney had paid for his services and the risk went with the job.

He was going back inside Charlotte's study. He was finally convinced of her complete innocence and she *was* his client. There was only one possible way of handling the situation with any chance of saving her skin.

Feeling a coppery taste at the base of his tongue, he set his long jaw and went back to the open french window. Before he reached the area of visibility from within the study, he crouched like a coiled spring and dived in low, firing blindly as he sought the cover of the low-backed armchair in which he had been sitting.

The shot echoed wildly as the bullet ricocheted off the metal frame of a mirror and a near-paralyzing blow all but took the back off Shayne's head. Feeling that he had just been grazed by a triphammer, he rolled over

and came up on his feet—barely in-time to duck another pile-driving straight right from Ed Grey's leather-capped wrist stump.

Shayne slid inside the blow and drove a hard left into the one-handed man's belly. His opponent's stomach was less flabby than Tony Delbas', but the punch had enough steam to stop him momentarily—enough for the detective to bring his right hand up and lay the flat of the heavy Colt automatic along the side of Ed Grey's face.

It looked like a mere tap, but the force of the heavy pistol was sufficient to put Grey down for the count. By the time he was sufficiently recovered to sit upright, a brace of uniformed cops were in the room with drawn Magnums at the ready.

"There's your murderer," Shayne said quietly. "If killing Andy MacLean isn't enough to put him away, you'll find Lou Barling's body in a freezer in the storeroom downstairs—also killed by that damned leather-capped stump. It packs one God-awful hell of a wallop."

"IT WAS A calculated risk," the redhead told Lucy Hamilton the next day over lunch at The Beef House. "I'd have looked like an idiot if it hadn't been there, but there didn't seem to be anywhere else it could be.

Nobody had been away long enough to move it out of the building. Besides, they'd almost certainly have been spotted."

"What was Barling nosing around for?" Tim Rourke asked. He was the third member of the little party.

"Trying to get back on the force. He'd got wind of the little blackmail game Ed Grey was running with Charlotte's tapes and wanted to tie her into it to justify his false arrest rap."

The redhead paused, added, "And that's why Len Sturgis came around to the hospital when I got clobbered the first time. Delbas had been in touch with him about it and a patrol car spotted my Buick in front of the Merritt Crescent apartment house and reported it. He wanted to know what angle I was playing—before I knew the angle existed."

Lucy said, "I wonder why Ed Grey did it. I mean—he was well fixed there with Charlotte and all."

"It will all come out when the court psychiatrists get through with him," Shayne replied. "My guess is his ego took a big blow when his wife made a go of her call house while he failed at legitimate business. Then there was the California accident that cost him his right hand. A thing like that can do a lot of warping to a proud man."

Lucy wrinkled her nose delicately, said, "It sounds like pure male chauvinist pig to me."

Tim Rourke groaned and clapped both hands to his head. "Is there *no* escape?" he said.

"What's Charlotte going to do now?" Lucy asked.

"She's not sure yet, Angel, but my guess is she and the girls will either take a long trip abroad or leave Miami and settle somewhere else when it's all over—maybe both. Hey, where are you going?"

This to the reporter, who rose slowly and regretfully to his full lanky height, said, "I'm going into the office and write this up, if it's going to make the first edition. Damn you to hell, Mike, for getting me up so early!"

When Rourke was gone, the redhead said, "He'll get over it when he gets his next paycheck."

"Speaking of paychecks," said Lucy, "Charlotte Ranney owes you a big fat bonus."

Shayne shook his red head and said, "No she doesn't."

"I'd like to know why not after what you did." Her brown eyes sparkled with anger.

In response, Shayne pulled out his wallet and from it extracted a cashier's check, which he unfolded and laid out on the table in front of her.

Lucy's eyes widened as she took in the amount and she pursed her lips in a silent whistle. "*Fifteen gees!*" she said, incredulous.

"For thirty-six hours' work," he replied. "And you said she was trouble!"

Lucy Hamilton looked back and him and said, "Well?"

Mike Shayne touched his bruised cheekbone gingerly, grinned a rueful half-grin and said, "Honey, you're right—but worth every damn bit of it."

In the Next Issue:

CRIME WITHOUT PUNISHMENT

The New Complete MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

By **BRETT HALLIDAY**

On the surface, Green Palms was opulent and without violence. But something was rotten at the core. Two unmotivated suicides were two too many. And there was much worse to come—namely murder.

TIGER IN THE SNOW

It was a strange alliance, the tiger and the dwarf, and it would take the tiger's every instinct, dulled by long years of captivity, and all of Mongo's noted ingenuity to defeat the man who hunted them both—a man and a loaded gun.

New MONGO FREDERICKSON Novelet

by GEORGE C. CHESBRO



I DON'T LIKE working blind, and there aren't many men who can get me to drop everything and fly three-thousand miles across the country on the strength of no more than a round-trip airline ticket and a barely legible note.

But Phil Statler was one of those men. I owed Phil.

He was waiting for me at the Seattle airport. Dressed in an ancient, patched sweater and

shapeless slacks, his full lips wrapped around a dead cigar, Phil was not likely to be taken for one of the world's most successful circus entrepreneurs, which he was.

"You look ugly as ever," I said, shaking the huge, gnarled hand extended to me, "only older."

Phil didn't smile. "Thanks for coming, Mongo."

"What's the matter? All the

phones broken around here?"

"I wasn't sure you'd come if you knew what it was about."

"Hey, that's great! That's one of the most exciting pitches I've ever heard!" Phil had jammed his hands into his pockets and was staring at his feet. "Okay," I continued seriously, "so I'm here. You got trouble?"

"Sam's loose."

The chill that ran through me had nothing to do with the Washington winter. "He kill anybody?"

"Not yet."

"My God, if Sam's loose in the city—"

"He ain't in the city."

"Where, then?"

"Somewhere out there."

I gazed in the direction of Statler's pointing finger, out across a broad, open expanse of crusted snow that glittered blue-white under the noon sun. Beyond the snow, forest hogged the horizon, stretching east and west as far as I could see.

"How do you know he's up there?"

"He was spotted. Some guy down in Ramsey."

"That's the town we just passed through?"

Phil Statler nodded. I leaned back against the jeep and pulled the collar of my sheepskin coat up around my ears. "Okay, Phil," I said, "I'm beginning to get the picture. You're missing

a four hundred pound Bengal tiger and you want me to employ my natural cunning to track him down. What would you suggest I say to Sam if I find him? He may not want to come back, you know."

Now, a man with a missing tiger needs a laugh, or at least a smile. But Statler simply continued to stare at me for what seemed a very long time. When he did finally speak, his hoarse, gravelly voice was a strange counterpoint to the tears in his eyes.

"It don't make no difference he didn't hurt anybody, Monggo," he said. The tears were already beginning to freeze on his cheeks, but he made no move to wipe them away. "They're going to kill Sam. The people in the county got their minds set."

"Okay. But if Sam's gotta' be killed I want it to be done by somebody he knows, somebody who cares about him. That's why I asked you to come, and that's why I didn't tell you what it was about. I want to see a man's face when I'm asking him to risk his life."

"I don't understand. There are other ways of bringing a tiger in without shooting him. You know that. You also know there are a lot of other men more qualified to do it. Nobody's ever accused me of looking like Tarzan."

Statler took a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to me. I unfolded it and recognized it as the front page of the local newspaper. **TIGER ON THE LOOSE** was splashed across the top. Below that was a picture of Sam's head, his eyes glowing with cat fire, his jaws gaping. His fangs glinted in the artificial light of the photographer's flash.

"Sam's never looked so good," I said. "That picture must be five years old."

"They got it off one of our publicity posters."

At the bottom of the page was a picture of a man who obviously enjoyed having his picture taken. Heavy-set, in his late thirties or early forties, he was the kind of man other men try not to pre-judge, and always do. I studied the photo for a few moments and decided that Sam's eyes reflected far more character. Underneath the photo was the caption, **GO GET HIM, REGGIE!**

"Who's Reggie?" I said, handing back the paper.

"Reggie Hayes," Statler said, spitting into the snow. "He's the County Sheriff, with headquarters down there in Ramsey. Sam's done a lot for him."

"I don't follow you."

"Seems Hayes is up for reelection. It also seems Hayes is not the model public servant.



I don't know all the details, but up until a few days ago he'd have had trouble getting his mother to vote for him. All that's changed. People forget about corruption when they feel their lives are in danger, and Hayes is the man who's going to bag their tiger for them.

"People don't want their terrors drugged or carted away in a net; they want them killed. Hayes knows that, and he's been up in those woods every day for the past three days. Sooner or later he's gonna' luck out. You read the local papers and you'll see how Sam's the best thing that ever happened to him."

"This is big gun country. I'd think Reggie'd have a lot of competition from the local sporting types."

"Sure. Must be hundreds of people around here who'd like to bag a tiger, but none of them want to tangle with a crooked sheriff who's out to win an election."

"I can see their point," I said evenly. I could. A county sheriff in an isolated area is the closest thing the United States has to an ancient feudal chieftain.

"I'd do it myself," Statler said, his eyes narrowing, "but I know I'm too old. I know I ain't got what it takes. I know you do. Besides," he continued after a pause, "you're the only one Sam ever really took to."

That took me back for a moment, then I realized it was true. I wondered if it was because both of us, in our way, lived life inside a cage; Sam's cage of steel, mine of stunted bone and flesh. I didn't dwell on it.

"I'll go after Sam because I want to," I said. "But there's no reason why I have to play Hayes' game. Seattle has a fine zoo. They should have the equipment I need."

Statler shook his head. "By now that cat's half-starved, and I think he's hurt. Pretty soon he'll be man-huntin', if he isn't

already. I didn't bring you out here to get yourself killed, Mongo. You ain't goin' after a killer cat with a popgun. You take heavy artillery, or you're fired before you start. Sam ain't as sentimental as I am."

I shrugged. "Phil, I'll go after Sam with a tranquilizer gun whether I'm working for you or not. You knew that, or you wouldn't have asked me to come down here."

"All right," he said after a long pause. "But you'll take along something with stopping power too. With soft-nosed cartridges."

"Done," I said easily. I turned and looked back the way we had come. "One thing puzzles me. Seattle's fifty miles south, with at least a dozen towns between here and there. And there didn't seem to be that much cover. How do you suppose Sam made it all the way up here without being spotted?"

"He had help," Statler growled. "Some lousy bastards who don't know a thing—"

"Whoa, Phil. Take it from the top."

He flushed and spat again in the snow. "Somebody must have thought they were doing Sam a favor. We'd been getting letters for about a week attacking us for keeping animals in cages. I didn't pay much attention to them until this hap-

pened. But Sam didn't escape; he was let loose."

"You said he might be hurt."

"We were keeping the livestock in the back of the armory in the middle of town. John was the only man on night duty, and they must have got the jump on him. They slugged him over the head, then broke the lock on Sam's cage.

"The city police figure they backed a truck up and forced him in. They found tire tracks further up the road here, along with Sam's tracks in the snow. *Stupid!* That's a big forest, but it ain't India. The hell of it is that Sam didn't want to go.

"They found blood on the bottom of the cage, which means whoever took him probably had to prod him to get Sam into the truck. A hurt tiger ain't nothin' to mess with, Mongo."

Suddenly Statler turned and slammed his fist against the fender of the jeep. "Now I feel real stupid for askin' you to come here. It's . . . it's just that I can't stand the thought of Sam gettin' it from somebody like Hayes, and I didn't know who else but you to ask."

I took a deep breath of the cold, pine-scented air. "Phil," I said, "you know how much I appreciate that compliment, but I'm going to be damned angry with you if I should get myself killed."

II

I SPENT THE rest of the day shopping with Phil Statler for provisions. The next morning I left him to pick up a few special items and drove the jeep into Seattle. It took most of the day and a lot of talking, but I left with a tranquilizer gun and a carton of darts.

The only items missing were a good horse and a modified saddle, and Statler was to meet me with these early the next morning. I was ready. I ate an early supper and headed up to my room. I'd have gone right to bed except for the fact that Reggie Hayes' feet were propped up on it.

Hayes' picture hadn't done him justice; in the flesh he was uglier. The skinny deputy leaning against the window sill wore a uniform at least one size too large for him and had a bad tic in his right cheek. Taken together, they resembled something that you might expect to pop up in your room after a week of steady drinking.

"Why don't you make yourself comfortable?" I said, putting the room key I hadn't had to use into my pocket. Both men stared. "What's the matter? You two never see a dwarf before?" I didn't wait for an answer. "Both of you are in my room uninvited," I said, looking

directly at Hayes. "The least you can do is take your feet off my bed."

My manner must have taken him off guard; he took his feet off the bed. Immediately he flushed.

"Look, now!"

"Hey!" the deputy sheriff said, trying and failing to snap his fingers. "I saw this guy hanging around the jail late yesterday afternoon."

Hayes' eyes narrowed. "You interested in jails, Frederickson?"

"You know my name?" The question was redundant, but I felt a strong urge to change the subject.

"Pete down at the desk told me," Hayes said, deliberately putting his feet back up on the bed. I said nothing. "This is a small town, Frederickson. We're all real friendly around here.

"That's how I know you and your friend been shopping for some real special items; a high powered rifle, soft-nosed cartridges, and lots of raw meat. Today your friend ordered a special saddle with the stirrups shortened, so it looks as though that stuff may be for you. If you didn't look like you had so much sense, I'd think you were going tiger hunting."

"I hear the woods here are full of them."

The deputy started to say something but Hayes cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Tell me," Hayes said, rising up out of the chair and hooking his fingers into his belt, "where does a dwarf get off thinking he can hunt a tiger?"

"I suffer delusions of grandeur."

Hayes pock-marked face reddened. He was obviously a man who enjoyed making his own jokes.

"How come you ordered twenty pounds of dog biscuits, smart guy?"

"Sam has peculiar tastes."

"Sam. . . ?"

"The tiger you want to kill so badly."

The deputy could restrain himself no longer. He strode across the room and grabbed Hayes' sleeve. "That's what I wanted to tell you, Reggie; I just remembered who this guy is. I was reading an article about him in one of those news magazines just the other day."

For a moment I was sure the man was going to ask me for my autograph.

"*Mongo*," the man continued. "Mongo The Magnificent! That's what they used to call him when he was with the circus!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The *circus*," the deputy said.

"This guy used to be with the same circus that tiger came from. The article told how he quit eight, nine years ago to become a college professor. It said he teaches something called criminology. It said he's also a private detective."

The deputy sucked in his breath like a minister who had inadvertently mumbled a four letter word in the middle of a sermon. Hayes eyed me coldly, and touched his gun.

"We got elected officials in this county, Frederickson. We don't need no private law."

Hayes was starting to take me seriously, and I didn't like that at all.

"Those were exactly my thoughts," I said.

"What are you doing here, Frederickson?"

"Hunting."

"That's what you think," Hayes said. A thin smile wrinkled his lips, but did not touch his eyes. "You need a license to hunt in this county, and you ain't got no license."

"Mr. Statler mentioned something about that," I said evenly. "I think that's all been taken care of. Statler Brothers Circus has done a lot of benefits in this state, and I think you'll find a letter from the Governor on your desk in the morning."

"I want that cat, Frederickson," Hayes said tightly,

making no effort to hide the menace in his voice. "You keep your nose out of this."

"You need Sam to keep you in office," I said, fighting the tide of anger I felt rising in me. "That tiger's running for your reelection, and it's a race that's going to cost him his life."

"I don't have to kill no tiger to get reelected," Hayes said defensively.

"That's not what I hear."

"You hear wrong!"

Hayes was breathing hard, his face livid. The deputy, taking his cue from his boss, was glowering at me. It was obvious that my attempt at suave diplomacy was getting me nowhere. Letter or no letter from the Governor, Hayes could be trouble. Bad trouble.

I took a deep breath and sat down in a straight-backed chair by the door.

"Sheriff," I said quietly, "I'd like you to explain something to me. You know, as a professional lawman instructing an amateur."

"What are you talking about?" Hayes said warily. His face had returned to its normal color, a reassuring sign that I did not think was going to last very long.

"I'm puzzled, Sheriff. I would think you'd be spending more time trying to catch the people who let that tiger loose."

"You are an amateur, Frederickson," Hayes said, his eyes glittering like black diamonds. "That happened in Seattle, and Seattle ain't in my jurisdiction."

"Right. But my guess—an amateur guess, of course—is that those men could live right here in this county."

"Consider: Ramsey County isn't exactly in a straight line from Seattle. In fact, you have to do a considerable amount of twisting and turning to get here. Now, why did they pick *this* particular spot to drop the tiger off? Why that particular stretch of woods? Maybe because it was the only area they knew of."

"Coincidence."

"I wonder. Second question: Why drop off a tiger in a section of forest so near a logging camp? Certainly, they must have realized an animal like that could be a threat to the men up there. I'm right, aren't I? Isn't there a logging camp up there? I thought I saw some smoke when I was out there yesterday."

Hayes said nothing. Now it was the deputy's face changing color, from its normal pasty shade to a light, sea green.

"So, you see, it's just possible that whoever let that tiger loose does live somewhere around here. If so, it shouldn't

take too much checking to narrow down the field of suspects."

"Impossible," Hayes said with a satisfied air of certainty. "They got away clean as a whistle."

"Yes, but you see it would take a special kind of truck to transport a cat that size. It would have to be completely enclosed, and strong enough to hold Sam. Why, it might even look something like your paddy wagon."

Hayes' face read like a map. Or a sign warning of thin ice.

"There's another funny thing about this whole business," I continued. "Most of the people who go after circus owners know a lot about animals. They care about them. The last thing an animal lover would do is take a circus-trained cat and put him up in those woods in the dead of winter. It is kind of peculiar, isn't it?"

"I thought you weren't on a case, Frederickson."

"I'm not," I said evenly. "Like I said, all I'm after is a tiger. It's just that I can't help thinking aloud sometimes. It's an awful habit, and I'm trying hard to break it."

"Who hired you?" Hayes voice was clipped, brittle.

"You might say I'm here on a mission of mercy."

Hayes laughed, but there was no humor in the sound.

"C'mon, smart guy, tell me how you'd go about figuring who let that cat loose."

This surprised me. Hayes was calling by bluff, and I could feel the damp, cold sweat starting under my arms.

"Well, first I'd start looking around the county for a truck that would do that kind of job. Chances are it might have some wood in the interior. If it did, I'd take some chips."

"Why?" The deputy's voice was high-pitched and nervous.

"To check for signs of tiger blood or hair," I said, raising my eyebrows modestly. "Tigers are notorious pacers, as I'm sure you're aware. Sam probably left traces all over the inside of that truck."

"What if the truck had been washed?"

"Gee, I hadn't thought of that," I said with a straight face. "Like I said, I'm new in the business and the tough ones sometimes get away from me." I shot a glance in the direction of Hayes. His eyes were riveted to my face, wide and unblinking like a cobra's. "Of course, there are blood tests. Blood can't be cleaned completely from wood. It soaks in. And you could always take some paint scrapings off the outside of the truck."

"What good would that do?" Hayes said quietly.

"Whoever backed that truck up left some paint on the cages." I didn't have the slightest idea whether or not that was true, but it would certainly be worth looking into. And I hoped it was enough to keep Hayes at bay.

"That's pretty good thinking, Frederickson," Hayes said evenly. "Of course, it's only guesswork. Things don't always work out that simple in real police work."

"Of course not."

"Uh, have you told anybody else about these ideas of yours?"

I smiled. "I'm sure I haven't come up with anything you haven't already thought of, Sheriff. I'm never one to interfere with another man doing his job." I paused to give my next words emphasis. "All I want is a shot at that tiger, then I'm on my way."

"That a fact?"

"That's a fact." I found it surprisingly easy to lie to Hayes. I'd repeat my scenario to the State Police later; but Sam came first.

"That cat's dangerous, Frederickson."

"I'll take my chances. All I want is my chance. Without interference."

"I need that cat, Frederickson," Hayes hissed, leaning far forward in his chair. "You don't understand."

I tried to think of something to say, and couldn't. An iron gate had slammed shut over Hayes' eyes and I could no longer read them. There was a long, tense silence during which the deputy watched Hayes watching me. Finally Hayes rose and walked quickly out the door. The deputy followed. I went after them and closed the door.

III

I DIDN'T SLEEP well, a fact that might have had something to do with the fact that I was supposed to get up in the morning and go after a Bengal tiger that outweighed me by a little over two hundred and fifty pounds. And the fact that I hadn't won the love and admiration of the local law didn't help matters any.

I got up around four and fixed some coffee on a hotplate in the room. Then I sat down by the window and waited for the sun to come up.

Phil Statler was supposed to be waiting for me at the edge of town with a horse and the rest of my supplies. At dawn I dressed warmly, picked up the kit with the tranquilizer gun and went down into the morning.

They'd probably been waiting for me all night.

I had a rented car parked out in the back of the rooming house, and the first man went for me as I emerged from the mouth of the alley into the parking lot. He had an unlit cigarette in his hand and was going through the pretense of asking for a match, but I had already sensed the presence of a second man behind me, pressed flat against the weathered side of one of the alley garages.

Somewhere I had miscalculated; either Hayes was very stupid, or I had over-played my hand and worried him too much.

On dry ground, unencumbered by a heavy woolen jacket, I wouldn't have been too concerned. Some years before I had taken steps to compensate for my rather diminutive size; I knew the precise location and relative sensitivity of every nerve cluster in the human body.

Besides that, I had a black belt, second Dan, in karate. All this, combined with the tumbling skills honed and perfected over the long years of traveling with the circus, combined to make me a rather formidable opponent when aroused, an asp in a world that catered to boa constrictors.

But snow wasn't my proper milieu. That, along with the

coat wrapped around my body, spelled trouble.

The second man lunged for me from behind. I sidestepped him and ducked under the first man's outstretched arms. At the same time I clipped him with the side of my hand on the jaw, just below the lower lip. He grunted, spat teeth and stared stupidly at me as I stripped off my coat.

By this time the second man had me around the head, and was beginning the process of trying to separate it from the rest of me. I gave him a stiff thumb in the groin, then jumped up on his back and onto a drain pipe leading up to the top of a tool shack.

There I stripped to my tee shirt and kicked off my boots while the two men stood in the deep snow below me. I thrust my hands in my pockets and waited patiently while they recovered slowly from their initial shock.

"Get him," the second man said to the first, indicating the pipe.

He got me, promptly and feet first. I caught him in the mouth with the heel of my shoe, hit the snow in a shoulder roll and came up on my feet on the plowed gravel of the driveway. The man I had hit was sitting in the snow, his eyes glazed, his hand to his ruined mouth. After

a moment he keeled over and lay still.

The other man was now indecisive, standing spread-eagled in the snow and glancing back and forth between me and his fallen partner.

"If you're going to do something, I'd appreciate it if you'd hurry," I said, bouncing up and down and flapping my arms against my body. "I'm getting cold."

The man frowned, reached into his coat pocket and drew out a knife. The steel glinted in the morning sun. I suddenly felt very unfunny. I stopped dancing, spread my legs in a defensive crouch and spread out my hands.

The man approached slowly, and looked almost comical slogging toward me through the deep snow. I backed up in the driveway until the gravel under my feet was relatively dry and hard packed. The man, waving the knife in the air before him, stepped out into the driveway and stopped.

His muddy eyes were filled with fear, and it suddenly occurred to me that this man was no professional; he was probably a crony of Hayes who had been recruited for the seemingly simple task of working over a dwarf. He'd gotten much more than he bargained for. For all I knew, he might be

considering using the knife in self defense. I straightened up and moved back against the building, leaving him plenty of room to get by me and out through the alley.

"You can go if you want to," I said evenly. "But if you come at me with that knife, I'll kill you. I assure you I can do it."

He hesitated. I circled around him carefully, stopped and let out what, for me, was a relatively blood-curdling yell. The man dropped the knife into the snow and sprinted out through the alley.

I put my clothes back on and went to my car. The first man was just beginning to stir as I backed out of the alley and into the street.

It still bothered me that Hayes would have made such an overt move after the conversation we had had earlier in the evening. Using that approach with some people would have spelled a death warrant, but Hayes wasn't big city crime; he was small fry, a corrupt, local sheriff.

It appeared that I had underestimated just how far he would go to insure his reelection. I wouldn't make the same mistake again.

I drove slowly down the main street on my way out of town, past the police station. The paddy wagon was in its usual

place, covered with a shining new coat of fresh, green paint.

Within twenty minutes, I stood with Statler and stared at the fresh horse tracks that veered off from the road to the east, disappearing far in the distance at the edge of the forest.

"Hayes came through here about an hour and a half ago," Statler said through clenched teeth. "Just as happy as you please. Wished me good hunting."

"He had reason to; he figured I was sitting in whatever passes for a hospital around here."

I sketched in some of the details of the incident in the parking lot while I made a final check of my gear.

"Damn, Mongo, I didn't think Hayes would go that far," Statler said quietly.

"He's running a little scared," I said hurriedly, before Statler could start worrying about me to the point where he'd take his horse back. "And he's got good reason. He's the boy who let your tiger loose. Or at least he's responsible."

"What. . . ?"

Hayes had a head start on me of at least an hour and a half; I didn't want to widen it by taking the time to explain everything to Statler. I tightened the cinch on the special

saddle once more and swung up on the animal's back.

"I think they used the county paddy wagon," I said. "There just might be some paint scrapings on Sam's cage. I suggest you make it your first order of business to find out. Then get the State bulls in here. Hayes had the wagon painted, but that won't do him any good if he didn't take the time to scrape off the first coat. And I don't think he did.

"Now, I don't know how long I'm going to be up there. You just make sure you're looking for my signal. When you see it, I'll be looking for the cavalry. With nets."

Phil Statler grunted, stepped forward and grabbed the reins. He was chewing furiously on a dead cigar, and that was always a bad sign.

"You're fired," he said evenly. I pulled at the reins, but Statler held firm. "I don't mind asking you to go up after Sam, but paying you to share the hills with that crazy, goddam sheriff is something else again. I've decided to save my money."

"You paid for the horse and the supplies," I said quietly, measuring each word. "The tranquilizer gun I got on my own. You take the horse, I'll walk up there, Phil. I mean it."

He grunted and tried to glare, but the feigned anger



failed to get past the tears in his eyes. "You screw this up, Mongo, and you get no more of my business."

"When you get my bill, you may not be able to afford any more business." I grinned, but Statler had already turned and was heading back towards my car. I dug my heels into the horse's side, pulling up my collar against the rising wind.

IV

THE AIR WAS clear and very cold, but it was a dry, sun-speckled cold, and the net result was that special kind of euphoria that comes when a man alone slips between Nature's thighs. I moved easily with the horse beneath me, taking deep gulps of the frigid air, trying to flush the accumulated filth of city living out of my lungs.

In the distance, smoke from the loggers' camp plumed, then drifted west with the wind currents. The hoofprints of Hayes' horse veered sharply to the east, running a straight parallel to the tree line. It was reasonable for Hayes to assume that Sam would get as far away from the camp, and the people in it, as possible. He wouldn't know any better.

I did. Sam was a circus animal, and had spent most of his

life around people. He had come to depend upon them for food and shelter, and I was convinced he would be somewhere in the vicinity of the camp, waiting.

That was good, and that was bad. If worse came to worse, he would kill and eat a logger. If that happened, there was no way Sam was going to get out of this alive. And he would be getting close to the edge; bewildered, wounded, cold and hungry, Sam had spent more than three days in the forest.

Working in his favor was the fact that he had always been one of the best and most reliable cats in the show, a strong and stabilizing influence on the other animals. On the other hand, he was—above all else—a tiger, a killing machine in his prime.

The horse, with his collective, primeval memory, would know that too, and there would be hell to pay if he got a whiff of Sam's spoor. I thought I had that problem solved.

I headed the horse in a direct line toward the smoke, then opened one of the saddle bags that was draped over the saddle horn. I opened the plastic bag there, and immediately the air was filled with the strong, ripe odor of bloody meat. Mixed in with the meat was a large dose of red pepper.

The horse whinnied and shied, but steadied again under a tug at the reins. This particular bag of meat had a dual purpose; to overwhelm the horse's sense of smell, and hopefully also act as a powerful magnet to a very hungry tiger. In the second bag, among other things, was a second batch of meat unadulterated, a suitable tiger snack. I hoped Sam would prefer it to me.

I was past the tree line, on the lip of the forest. It was immensely serene and peaceful. The vast canopy of brown and green overhead had cut down on the snowfall, and the floor of the forest was carpeted with a thick bed of pine needles.

In a few minutes we emerged into an open glen. To my left, high up on a mountain, I caught the glint of sunlight off metal. It could have been a rifle. Or binoculars. I hoped it was a rifle; if it was binoculars, it probably meant he had already spotted me.

I veered back into the protective gloom of the forest, heading the horse on a path that would, if my sense of direction was correct, take us in ever-shrinking concentric circles around the camp's perimeter.

I ran through an inventory of my equipment for what must have been the tenth time. But I felt it was justified; when some-

thing happened, it was likely to happen fast, and I didn't want to be groping around for some needed piece of equipment.

I had the tranquilizer gun in a sheath on the right side of the saddle, just in front of my leg. I had a large supply of extra darts in one of the bags, but the gun would only take one dart at a time. I would have to make the first shot count. If it didn't, there was the high powered hunting rifle on my other side.

I broke the chamber and checked to make sure it was fully loaded, took off the safety and replaced it lightly in its oiled scabbard. I was as ready as I would ever be.

Finally, of course, there were the dog biscuits crammed into the pockets of my wool parka. The ultimate weapon.

That brought me a laugh, and I relaxed in the saddle, putting myself on automatic pilot and letting my senses guide me.

Curious: It had been years since I'd last seen Phil Statler, and yet all the old feelings had come back, a love-hate ambivalence that would live with me to the day I died, like an extra limb that could not be amputated.

The reaction was not to Phil himself, but to what he represented—the circus.

Nature had compounded her error by also endowing me with an intelligence and vast reservoir of dreams that would never let me be content tumbling before a faceless mass that would never see beyond the stunted body that twirled before them in center ring.

I had wanted more.

I had parlayed my earnings in the circus into a college education, graduate work, and eventually a PhD in Criminology. I had traded the ring of the circus for the square of the classroom, and still it was not enough.

Within a year I had had my license as a private detective. Teaching was still a necessity, because dwarfs do not ordinarily inspire great confidence in potential clients seeking a private detective. But it had given me an opportunity to prove that beneath the stunted body, the over-sized head, was a man. A man with unique skills and capabilities.

And it had all begun with Phil Statler, the man who had given me his faith, his trust, the man who had spoken to my mind rather than my body.

And there had been Sam. Always I had loved the animals, and had used their company to while away the lonely hours between cities and performances. And Sam had been

my favorite, my friend, and we had spent many hours together, staring at one another from behind the bars of our respective cages.

But that had been many years before, and I would have been a fool to suppose that our friendship represented anything more than a small paper boat adrift on the raging river of this natural savagery.

And now I was hunting him with a dart gun, a situation that suddenly seemed even more ludicrous when you considered the fact that Sam was hurt. I leaned forward and spurred the horse, trying to push the rising fear out of my mind.

I completed the first circuit of the camp, then reined the horse in and began another, tighter circle. It was growing dark, and I knew that soon I would have to stop and camp.

I opened a quart container of chicken blood and began dripping it in the snow behind me. I didn't like the idea of Sam coming up from behind, but it couldn't be helped; I had to find a way to lure him to me before Hayes got him.

A half mile into the second circuit I found something that made the blood pound in my skull; two sets of prints, crisscrossing each other. One set belonged to Hayes' horse, and the

other belonged to old Sam.

That told me two things, neither of which gave me any great measure of comfort; Hayes had spotted me and was staying close. And Sam was near, somewhere out in the darkening forest.

Sam's tracks were heading northwest. I swung the horse in that direction and bent forward in the saddle, reaching down for the tranquilizer gun.

The boom of the gun's report shattered the stillness, and a shower of splinters ripped at my face as the slug tore into the tree directly behind me. It was followed by a second shot, but I was already huddled down over the horse's neck, urging him on at full speed through the brush. Suddenly the trees were gone and we were floundering in the deep snow at the edge of a clearing.

My head down, I had no warning save for an intense, electrical sensation along my spine a split second before the horse screamed and reared. The reins were jerked out of my hands and I made a grab at the horse's mane, but it was useless; I flew off his back, landing on my side in the snow, half stunned.

I was still gripping the tranquilizer gun, and the bag of bloody meat had fallen off with me, but the rest of my supplies,

including the rifle, were still on the horse that was galloping off through the snow.

I sat up and let loose a selected string of obscenities, vowing that I would never again go to see another Western.

I felt his presence before I actually saw him. That presence was very real, yet somehow out of place, like a half-remembered nightmare from childhood. I turned my head slowly, straining to pierce the gathering dusk. Finally I saw him, about thirty yards away, his tawny shape almost hidden by the shadow of the forest.

"Sam," I whispered. "Easy, Sam."

He seemed bigger than I remembered, magnified rather than diminished by the vastness of his surroundings. Thousands of miles away from his native India, crouched in alien snow, he was still, in a very real sense, home, freed from the smells of men and popcorn.

Sam flowed, rather than moved; his belly slid across the snow, and his eyes glittered. I was being stalked.

The snow around me was spattered red from the contents of the broken bag; I was the *piece de resistance*, sitting in the middle of a pool of beef and chicken blood.

I began to giggle. Whether it was from the shock of the fall, or out of sheer terror, or an appreciation of the ultimate absurdity of my position, I wasn't sure. It simply struck me as enormously funny that a dwarf should be sitting in the snow facing a hurt, hungry tiger, with nothing but a tranquilizer gun and pockets full of dog biscuits.

As a last line of defense, I had the flare gun and one flare in an inner pocket, but that would have to be removed and loaded. It was obvious that I wasn't going to have time, even if I chose to use it.

Still giggling, my hair standing on end, I slowly crawled away from the patches of blood. Sam, seeing me move, stopped and crouched still lower, his ears pointed and his lips curled back in a snarl.

I slowly cocked the tranquilizer gun and brought it around to a firing position. The muscles on Sam's flanks fluttered; the movement had made him nervous, and he was ready to charge.

Still I waited. There was only one cartridge in the gun. One shot. I would have to make it count, waiting until the last moment to make sure I didn't miss.

The muscles bunched in Sam's hind legs, and I brought

my gun up to firing position. At the same time I caught a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye, to the left, behind Sam.

Hayes. Ignoring me, he had drawn a bead on Sam. My next action was pure reflex. It had nothing to do with conscious thought, but with some mad emotional need deep within my being. I wheeled on Hayes and pulled the trigger on my gun.

The dart caught him in the left side, slicing neatly through the layers of his clothing and piercing his flesh.

His gun discharged harmlessly in the air as he clawed at the dart in his side. But the effect of the drug was almost instantaneous; Hayes stiffened, then toppled over in the snow, out of my line of sight.

Now I was in a bit of a jam. Sam had already begun his charge, and about all I could do was throw my arms up in front of my face. But the report of the gun had startled Sam, frightened him and thrown him off his stride. By the time he reached me, he was already trying to brake his charge, looking back over his shoulder.

He veered to the side, ramming into me and knocking me over. I rolled, frantically clawing at the zipper on my parka. But rolling in the snow, fingers

frozen with fear, is not the optimum condition under which to unzip a jacket. Besides, it was stuck.

I ended up on my knees, staring at Sam, who was squatting about fifteen yards away. I could see the wound on his leg now where Hayes or one of his men had jabbed him; it was raw and festering, enough to drive any animal wild with pain.

But Sam wasn't moving, and he had his head cocked to one side. He seemed almost uncertain. I was past my giggling stage, and it occurred to me that there was just a chance he might have gotten a good whiff of me as he went past, and that it might have stirred memories.

A romantic thought, indeed. But it was the only hope I had.

"Sam." My voice was so weak I could hardly hear myself. I cleared my throat. "Sam! Hey, Sam! Hey, Sam!"

Animals occasionally grunt. Sam grunted.

"Hi! Sam!" It was time to assert myself. Gripping the tranquilizer gun by the barrel, I rose and slowly began to walk forward. "Okay, Sam. Easy Sam. It's all right. I'm not going to—"

I'd made a mistake, gone too far too fast. Sam was going to charge; I could see that now. He reared back, the muscles in

his hind legs forming great knots. His ears lay flat against his head, and his lips curled back in a snarl. Suddenly he let out a thunderous roar.

And rolled over.

Sam was somewhat hampered by the wound on his leg, but he still managed a pretty fine roll. He came up and squatted, tongue out, staring at me. Not getting any reaction from me save a frozen, open-mouthed mumble, Sam decided to try it again. He rolled back the other way, sat up and whined. One paw was raised a few inches off the snow.

It took me almost a full minute to realize that I was crying. Sam waited patiently.

"Sam," I murmured. "Oh damn, Sam. You damn animal."

From that point on, I never hesitated. I threw the gun into the snow, walked forward and wrapped my arms around Sam's neck. Sam purred contentedly while I groped in the snow for some of the meat, stuffing it into his mouth.

I was laughing again, loud and long.

I gathered the meat together in a pile and left Sam long enough to check out Hayes. The sheriff was breathing fairly regularly. As far as I could tell, his only lingering problem from the drug would be a pronounced desire to want to sleep for the

next few weeks. But he'd make it.

If I made it. There was still the problem of Sam, and the meat was gone. Sam was looking around for more. I walked slowly forward, holding a dog biscuit. Sam's tongue flicked out and it disappeared.

At that rate, they wouldn't last long. I gave him a handful, then sat down in the snow. I managed to loose the zipper and reach the flares. Still muttering words of encouragement that I hoped a tiger would find soothing, I fired one off into the sky.

The flare burst in the night with a eye-piercing flash of blues and yellows, and then it was once again dark. Sam started, but settled down when I gave him another biscuit.

I vaguely wondered what the reaction of Phil and the State Troopers would be when they

arrived and discovered one very wide awake tiger waiting for them.

"Roll over, Sam."

Sam rolled over. I figured the biscuits would last longer if I made Sam work for them.

Somewhere in the distance I thought I heard the sound of snow mobiles. Sam heard them too, and his ears snapped back.

"Roll over, Sam. Play it again, Sam." Sam rolled over, but this time I withheld the biscuit for just a moment. "Now, Sam, you must be a very good tiger or you are going to be shot. Boom. Do you understand?"

Sam rolled over.

I was hungry. I took one of the biscuits out of my pocket and stared at it. It had a greenish tint. I took a small bite out of it, then gave the rest to the waiting tiger. It tasted terrible.

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The Motorman



Joe Madden committed murder as an act of kindness. But it did not occur to him that the one he killed for might be moved to return the favor in the same way.

by **STANLEY F. WITHE**

JOE MADDEN worked the 57 run, four in the afternoon to midnight, as a trolley car motorman for the city of San Francisco. Ten years on the same job, always the same run, four times a day, from the Downtown shopping and financial district to the outer Mission section and back again.

Over the years most of the trolleys had been replaced by buses. The energy crunch was belatedly giving people second thoughts. The quiet, gasless trolleys without the obnoxious fumes and high maintenance costs of buses were "in." Unfortunately, not many trolleys remained in service. Joe considered himself lucky he wasn't a bus jockey. Give him a trolley any day, which had a personality all its own.

He felt he was a very fortunate man. He was married to a woman he loved. He took pleasure in his job. The passengers, mostly regulars, were working people like himself and he enjoyed their company. He couldn't understand the motor-men who thought the job boring and grew sour and constantly complained about the customers. He related to his passengers, and to a limited extent he shared in their joys and disappointments. There were very few of them who thought of him as only another anonymous part of the machinery.

Even the rain didn't dampen his spirits. There were still the friendly greetings between him and his passengers. One of the first to board the trolley, while still in the financial district, was June Talbot. She usually sat in one of the single seats near the front. Her stop would be the last on the route.

She was about twenty-three or four, had dark hair, pleasant clean-cut features and the modest polite manners of a real lady. A slight girl, almost delicate, Joe thought of her as a throw-back to what girls used to be or, maybe, what he liked to think they used to be. No silly modern beauty salon had fouled her all up with shellac.

It was about a year ago that he had first noticed her. She

told him she had only been in San Francisco a few months, was recently married and worked for a Downtown brokerage house as a clerk. It appeared to be a happy marriage with a lot of love. Perhaps they cared as much for each other as Mary and himself.

June referred to her husband as her Harry. She mentioned how he worried if she was not home before dark, his concern that she dress warmly enough in the chill weather. She told him about all the little considerate things that people do for each other when they are in love.

Joe had responded in kind. He had smiled and told her all the things Mary did to make his life more enjoyable.

He gave all his regular passengers nicknames. June's was *Lady*. Of course, he would never call them by anything other than their given names to their faces. But after work, when he told Mary about the different things that had happened during the day, he would use their nicknames.

About seven months ago Joe began noticing some things that caused him to feel sad. Lady began wearing sunglasses, even on days when there wasn't any sun. One of the passengers told him it was because she had a black eye. Then, one day, her right arm was bruised.

Occasionally, she missed time from work. She never complained or hinted at trouble, but she had lost her cheerfulness.

She never spoke about Harry anymore.

Joe never spoke to her about these things. There are times when a person's privacy should not be invaded. Instinct told him that this was one of those times. Remarks from other passengers, added together, gave him a picture of what was happening. Her husband was lazy. He couldn't hold a job. She supported the household. When he drank, which was most of the time, he became ugly and beat her up. Old Mrs. Ryan insisted that it was always the nice girls who wound up marrying the bums.

From the description of Harry given to him by some of the passengers, Joe could now put a name to the drunk who sometimes got on the trolley Downtown on the last run and didn't get off until the final stop. A few times, he had fallen asleep and had to be waked up. He usually smelled of beer or stale wine. He always appeared unshaven and dirty looking.

It was still raining and getting dark when Lady got off the trolley. Joe took time out to eat a roast-beef sandwich Mary had prepared for him before making

the return trip to Downtown.

On his final run, leaving Downtown at eleven in the evening, there were only four people on the trolley when he made the stop at Mission and Duboce streets. The rain had turned into a downpour and the man who entered the trolley, swaying slightly, was soaked.

His hair was mussed and he needed a shave. His mouth was twisted in a cruel smile as he reached into several pockets before producing a quarter for his fare. The top of a wine bottle was sticking out of another pocket. Without saying a word he stumbled to an empty seat and flopped down. Harry was obviously finishing a night on the town.

The rain and the reflection of oncoming lights made visibility difficult. Fortunately traffic was light. The interior of the trolley was damp and uncomfortable. When it got to the end of the run, Harry was the only passenger left. Joe had to shake him to wake him up.

Staggering, he came to the front of the trolley and stood by the open door, cursing the rain. The streets were empty of pedestrians. In the rear-view mirror Joe noticed a car approaching from the rear and to the right of the trolley. The street light on the corner was not working and Joe was afraid

Harry might slip or trip on the wet iron steps.

He stood behind Harry and gently placed his hands on Harry's shoulders to assist him safely off the trolley. But his arms, as if independent of his mind, shot straight out with his full weight behind them. Harry hurtled forward just in time to land in front of the approaching car. The impact made a loud thud—a thud as final as death.

When Joe was a small boy he had heard the same sound when a large German Shepherd ran in front of his father's old Hudson sedan. The dog, he remembered, had been dead upon impact. The car screeched to an abrupt halt about twenty feet away. Harry was impaled on the front bumper. Quickly, Joe called the carbarn on the two-way radio and told them a passenger had fallen off the trolley in front of a car. He knew they would send an ambulance and notify the police.

The police arrived promptly. They confirmed that Harry was dead. The driver of the car, a young black on his way to work at an all-night restaurant, had seen nothing until after the impact. Hearing this, Joe silently released his breath. The police took statements from both Joe and the driver of the car. The broken wine bottle in Harry's coat pocket was the

clinch. They called the death an accident caused by the actions of the deceased.

Not until everybody had left and he was again alone did the reaction set in. Joe could not understand what had caused him to lose control of himself. He had never pictured himself playing the roles of judge, jury and executioner, finally meting out death like an avenging angel. The thought disgusted him.

However, he felt no guilt because Harry was dead. The world would be a better place without him. Even though, as a younger person might put it, he had "blown his cool," Joe felt he could learn to live with what he had done. The fear of discovery, perhaps through some fluke, was going to be more difficult to live with.

That night, in bed with Mary beside him, he found sleep impossible. When he had told her about Harry, he stuck to the version he had given the police. He looked over at his wife. She was still awake. He thought of the wonderful happy ten years they had been married. It was strange that he could think of love and death at the same time, as if they belonged together.

She said, "Try and get some sleep. There was nothing you could have done." She added

gently placing a hand on his shoulder, "That woman, his wife—you said he beat her and was miserable to her, right?"

"Yes, sometimes she'd have a split lip or a black eye. And there were other things."

"Well," Mary said, "maybe everything happened for the best. At least, now she will get some peace."

"That's true." He realized Mary was trying to ease what she thought was his guilt at not being able to prevent the accident. She didn't know it was fear that was keeping him awake.

"It sounds corny, I know, but you're a great big diamond-in-the-rough kind of guy. You're a considerate and gentle man."

He held her close. He had fallen asleep when she sighed and said, almost in a whisper, "I'm a lucky woman."

The next afternoon, she prepared the sandwiches he was to take to work. Just before he left the flat, she took a towel and polished the small gold dime-sized button she insisted he wear on the lapel of his uniform. It was an award he had been given two years before by the Transit Authority in recognition of his long accident-free record. The irony was not lost on him.

Over the next few months, Joe noticed a marked improve-

ment in Lady's appearance and manner. Perhaps things *had* worked out for the best. No longer did she wear dark glasses. She was still timid and shy but the looks of desperation and fear she had not always been able to conceal were gone. Neither of them ever referred to her late husband.

On only one occasion did she ever talk about her life before arriving in San Francisco. She was born in a small Amish farming town in Pennsylvania. "You know," she said, "the place where all those funny people with the black buggies and black clothes come from."

She smiled when she had said it. She wasn't making fun of them but wanted him to see the humor in the contrast between the place of her birth and swinging San Francisco.

Harry by now was just a distant memory. Fear no longer deprived Joe of his sleep. All was well with his world. He was thinking with pleasure about the Oakland Raiders football game he would view on television Sunday when he made his regular trolley stop at Mission and South Van Ness. It caught him by surprise when a supervisor from the Transit Authority stepped briskly onto the trolley and told a motorman who had accompanied him to take over the controls.

"The boss wants to see you at the car barn. I'll drive you over." Flat voice—no reasons given. The supervisor was already moving towards the dark city-owned Ford parked at the curb.

The boss, the big fat man with the booming voice, only called you in from the job when there was trouble. All Joe's fears returned. If it was an arrest, why hadn't it been made on the trolley? He answered his own question. They wouldn't do anything that might put the passengers in danger.

Perhaps things were not as bad as he was making them out. It might be some dingbat with a complaint. But in his heart he knew it must be more than that.

A cigarette would have helped relieve the tension that was building up inside him—but he was afraid his hand would shake when he tried to light it.

The supervisor drove in silence, his face slightly turned towards the open window on his side, as if purposely to avoid conversation. The car barn was a huge, dirty old cement block building erected on a solid slab of cement. The boss had a small office partitioned off in one corner of the building. He could hear voices as he approached the door. Quickly, like a man who wants to get the suspense

over, he swallowed and knocked on the door.

The boss, in shirtsleeves and no tie, was sitting behind his battered desk. A tall thin man, he had never seen before, was standing beside the desk. They both looked at him as he entered. The tall thin man had blunt features and questioning eyes. He was dressed in a suit complete with vest and tie. It was obvious he didn't work for the Transit Authority.

"Sit down, Joe," the boss said. His voice was soft and his manner solicitous. He pointed to the man standing by the side of the desk. "This is Inspector Kelsey from the San Francisco Police Department." Kelsey acknowledged the introduction with a curt nod.

Joe sat on the chair, his hands clasped on his lap. "What's wrong?" He looked at the boss.

"Joe, there is no easy way to tell you this." The boss glanced at the police inspector as if for help and, receiving none, continued. "Your wife is dead. She was mugged."

He came around to the front of the desk and placed a large paw on Joe's shoulder. "What can I say? You know how I hate to have to tell you something like this."

Joe felt only shock. Grief, sadness, loneliness and self pity

would come later. He had been born in New England, brought up to believe that grief was a very private personal feeling. It was something you gave way to only when you were alone.

For the first time, Inspector Kelsey spoke. "It happened just a block from where you live. She was returning home from the small grocery store on the corner. We have a witness who saw what happened from her living-room window."

He consulted a notebook, added, "It was a Mrs. Tolliver. She said the mugger was a man, perhaps in his early twenties. He was wearing levis and a windbreaker. Your wife was struck on the head with a tire iron. This was left at the scene. Of course, her purse was taken. The mugger ran south towards Golden Gate Park, where he got lost."

"And no one tried to stop him?"

The inspector said patiently, "Mrs. Tolliver is in her late seventies and there was no one else around. Of course, our investigation is just starting. It will probably turn out to be some vicious addict supporting a habit."

"I'll drive you home," the boss said.

"Before you go, tell me—did your wife have any jewelry? If she had any and we knew what

it was, it might help us. We could alert the hock shops."

"Jewelry? On what *I* make? The only thing she had was a diamond wedding ring. It was never off her finger."

"Well, it's gone now. Any initials?"

"Both our initials, and the year 1964 was engraved inside the ring. It was a single stone."

"Tomorrow," the inspector said, "I am going to have Mrs. Tolliver view mug shots of known muggers, but I don't hold out much hope. I think she was too far away to make a positive identification. I'll keep in touch with you."

When Joe got home, which was a lower five-room flat on Twenty-third Avenue, he made no effort to contain his grief. Much later came the reluctant acceptance that left him emotionally drained. If he could get his paws on the scum who had done this, he would strangle him, not in hostile anger, but slowly, deliberately drawing the agony out before death brought relief. He looked at his strong motorman's hands and flexed his fingers.

He was grateful to get back to work. Even the longest days add up to weeks and become months.

He called Inspector Kelsey regularly to find out if any progress was being made to-

ward apprehending the killer. The answer was always the same—"We're working on it"—or words to that effect. He realized he must be becoming a nuisance at Police Headquarters.

The empty flat wasn't a home anymore. It was just a place to prepare and eat a simple meal and sleep. He thought several times of moving, but the idea of leaving the place he had spent the happiest ten years of his life was even worse.

Sometimes, on his days off from work, he would take long walks in the downtown area of the city so as not to be alone. But being in a crowd when you cannot become a part of that crowd proved utter desolation. He tried going to the movies, but found he was seeing pictures whose titles he couldn't remember five minutes after leaving the theater.

Seven months had passed since Mary's death, when Lady, alighted from the trolley and turned her ankle on the bottom step. Because hers was the last stop on the run, Joe was able to help her to the entrance of her apartment building. Fortunately, it was not far from the trolley stop, so he did not lose more time than he could safely make up.

The next day, when she

boarded the trolley, she thanked him for his help and told him her ankle was better.

He thought about how things had changed—her husband and his wife, both gone. Two lonely people left. He was surprised at himself when he found himself thinking of asking her out to dinner on his day off. Well, why not? He was probably ten years older than she was, but that wasn't such a great difference.

However, it wasn't until two weeks later that he got up the nerve to ask her if she would have dinner with him at a little family-style Italian restaurant he knew in the North Beach section of San Francisco. He was pleased when she accepted.

They discovered they had some interests in common. They both enjoyed the same kinds of foods, had the same taste in movies, enjoyed walking in the country. Perhaps best of all, they could both enjoy silence while in each other's company.

Over the next two months they were with each other two or three times a week. They didn't always go to dinner or the movies. Sometimes, when the weather was pleasant, they took long walks in Golden Gate park.

Then, one evening when they were having dinner at a res-

taurant in Chinatown, she gave him some bad news. She placed her hand on top of his and said, "I'm going to move back to Pennsylvania next month."

"But why?" He didn't try to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

"San Francisco hasn't exactly been a dream city for me. If I move back close to my family, I won't feel so lonely."

Joe had not realized before how much her company meant to him. She had filled the lonely empty void in his life with the warmth of companionship.

In answer to his sad expression, she said, "You're the only good thing that's happened to me in this town. I shall miss you very much."

He could not let her leave. All the long sad days would return.

"Please marry me." Now that he had committed himself, he looked into her eyes, hardly daring to hope. Much like a salesman pitching a bonus offer he said, "I'll do my best to make you a good husband."

She hesitated, reached across the table, clasped one of his hands in both of hers. "If you're sure I can make you a good wife, I shall be happy to marry you."

They decided, since it would

be the second marriage for both of them, to have a private civil ceremony at City Hall. They'd wait for a honeymoon until his summer vacation and then take a trip back to Pennsylvania so that he could meet her folks.

But she wouldn't go back to the flat with him, not that night.

"I hate to sound like little Goody Two Shoes, but it would be so much better if we waited until we were married. Will you forgive me?"

He could understand. He even approved. Joe was a simple man and never had been able to understand or accept the new permissiveness.

He was glad she raised no objection when he suggested they live in his flat. He had been afraid she would not want to live where memories of a former wife might linger. The two-family house, in a middle-class neighborhood, was built in the middle Twenties. Joe appreciated the genuine wood, the real plaster, the fine oak floors. He detested the modern boxes with their wall-board, their "genuine" simulated wood beaver-board partitions, their cheap composition floors.

The furniture was inexpensive but serviceable. Joe remembered, when he and Mary were first married, they had purchased the three-piece

matching living-room set at a Sears February clearance sale. It still looked darn good.

Maybe now, with Lady, it would be a home again, not just a nameless flat, as impersonal as the waiting room in a bus station. He had a cleaning woman come in and tidy up the premises a week before he and Lady were to be married. He had given all Mary's personal belongings to a local charity.

After they were married, he took Lady on a quick tour of the flat. He was glad when she smiled and told him how much she was going to like living here.

But he was not feeling the happiness he had expected. He kept thinking of Mary and felt as if he were bringing a stranger, almost an intruder, into *their* home. He realized with a sinking heart that it had been a mistake to bring a new wife to a place where he had spent so much of his life with another woman.

Later, he decided, he would find a reason to suggest to Lady that they find another place to live. In the meantime, he must not spoil this day for Lady. After all, his hang-ups were not her fault.

Together they walked into the bedroom. Lady sat on the edge of the bed and waved him to a chair next to the night-

stand. She was looking at him intently, a slight smile on her lips.

"Darling, I have something I want to tell you." Before she could continue the phone rang and he excused himself and went back to the livingroom and picked up the receiver.

It was Inspector Kelsey from Police Headquarters. The inspector thought he would be glad to hear they had caught the mugger who had murdered his wife. An alert policeman had nabbed him trying to rob another woman last night on Twenty-Seventh Avenue. The man's name was George Akins and he had a long rap sheet. They had not secured a confession but that would come. It just took a little time.

Joe thanked him. It had been thoughtful of the Inspector to phone.

He hoped Lady would not ask about the call. It wasn't a pleasant subject to bring up at this time. He need not have worried. She was only anxious to tell him what was on her mind before they were interrupted.

"Darling, as I tried to say before the phone rang, I love you very much!"

He hoped she could not tell by looking at his face how much he longed for Mary's presence.

She continued, the slight smile still on her lips. "You see I've known for a long time that you were in love with me. I happened to be looking out the kitchen window the night you pushed Harry off the trolley. Even though the street light on the corner was out, the lights on the trolley were bright enough so I could see what happened. Thank God, no one else saw you! Oh, how I worried about *that*!

She looked at him with admiration in her eyes. For a long moment he could only stare at her. "But you never said anything?"

She continued, regarding him fondly, "I never fooled you, did I, dear, with my brave talk about how wonderful my marriage was. You saw through me, didn't you?"

He nodded. There wasn't anything he could say.

"You see, dear, I never wanted to lie, but if I hadn't done something to hide my despair, I think I would have died."

He would never be able to tell her *why* he had pushed Harry off the trolley. He didn't know himself. It was probably pity. It was not love.

She continued, "After what you did for me, I realized that when you were talking about your life with Mary you were really covering up your true

feelings about your own hateful marriage, just like me." She leaned forward and put her arms around his neck. "It was meant to be, darling—you and I."

He felt drained. He didn't know what to say, so he remained silent. She was talking enough for both of them.

She removed her arms from around his neck, groped in her purse side of the bed and removed a small white box tied with a string, which she held in her hand.

"What's in the box?" he asked.

She shrugged impatiently. "Nothing important, dear." "The important part is what I did to show my love for you. Love is not a one-way street. I had to do *my* part. If I hadn't, we would not be together now. I was the mugger that killed your wife and released you from your horrible marriage.

"It was not so difficult, really. I have a slight build. Dressed in levis, a windbreaker and one of those crazy flapping leather hats, I knew, if anyone saw me, they'd think I was a man. I made it seem like any old mugging."

She looked at him like a child waiting for praise from an adult.

Joe was completely drained of emotion. He had been listening

but the things he was hearing did not seem real. He could not relate them to reality.

"Here!" She was pressing the small box into his limp fingers. "You don't have to bother to open it now. It's only a wedding ring. It belonged to that woman you were married to. I am only giving it back to you, so you will know I did what I said I did, and am not just taking credit for something someone else did."

The box slipped from his fingers and dropped to the floor next to his feet. He did not feel any reaction yet. He was still numb. She kept talking.

"Harry was a big fat zero, you know. I met him when I first arrived in San Francisco. He was always fussy about his appearance. He was really a handsome man."

Suddenly, her voice developed a biting, cutting edge. "He was not honest with me, Joe. He never told me he was married. Dumb me! Of course, he knew I wouldn't have gone out with

him if I'd known he was a married man."

Her tone dripped scorn. "Then he told me he would get a divorce. Big deal! Talk is cheap. Finally, I had to take matters into my own hands."

He looked into her face. Her features were twisted in hate. "His wife drowned. An accident on purpose, if you know what I mean. I just followed her to the pool in the park one day. Well, you can guess the rest. Then, when everything was settled, we got married."

Her voice rose. "Of course, when he got what he wanted, the only thing most men really want—why, then the drinking and the beatings started." She kept talking, faster now, a seemingly inexhaustible flow of words.

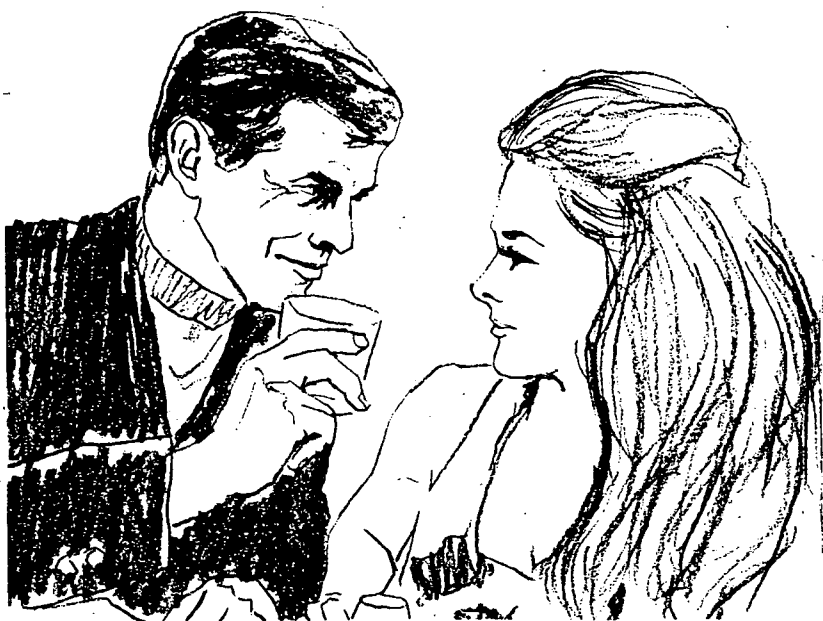
Gradually, everything was sorting itself out in Joe's mind. He wasn't listening to her anymore. He looked down at his strong motorman's hands as they gripped the arms of the chair.

Coming Soon:

THE SAVONAROLA SYNDROME

A Taut Long Novelet of Suspense

by JAMES HOLDING



Between You, Me, And The Lamppost

He was a spy without an employer; no one knew he was there, and yet at least one side was paying him well...

by **EDWARD WELLEN**

THE WINO in Washington's Lafayette Park mumbled his spiel about needing only forty-five cents more to make up his fare to Baltimore and a waiting job. It was plain no job awaited him: it was plain his true job for some time now had been

this business of speaking of an imaginary job.

The man he braced cut the wino short with a "Yes, yes," and dug in his change pocket. Without checking his stride the man tossed the wino a coin. The wino fumbled it. The man heard it hit the walk and roll but he did not look back.

The half-dollar looked like a silver dollar till it rolled to a stop at the base of a lamp standard. Grant Noland fixed on it bleakly and made for it shakily. He put a hand to the pole to steady himself and slowly and with great dignity bent to pick up the coin.

Lamp standards have a removable plate in the base to let maintenance men get at the wiring. This lamp standard's plate was missing. The thought struck Noland through the fog that this hollow at the base of the lamp standard would make a lovely *dybok*.

To those in the Great Game, *dybok*, Russian for "small oak tree," stands for a dead drop, a hiding place where one agent leaves messages and packages for another agent. Noland smiled. Something possessed him—a *dybbuk*?—to reach in and feel around. His hand froze in mid-grope. A small box was held magnetically to the inwards of the lamppost.

And all at once Grant Noland

was back in the Great Game, in the days before—through no fault of his own—his cover had blown embarrassingly and he was no more use to the Agency.

The blood rushed to his head with a new intoxicating vigor. Noland pulled the box free and palmed it and in one smooth motion picked up the half dollar as well. He shoved himself upright and with Chaplinesque fastidiousness dusted off his stained and wrinkled trousers.

He sauntered away, one hand flipping the half dollar, the other in his pocket tight around the box. He headed for the nearest bar in the straightest line he could manage. But though he bought a shot with the half dollar he secretly spilled it on the floor and only made believe to swallow it. He staggered outside again and spent the next half hour in a meandering that had the aim of shaking off a tail. He wound up in the reading room of the Library of Congress.

Out of practice as he was, Noland still felt sure no one had followed him here. Shielding himself behind an open atlas, he slid the lid of the box off and uncovered a frame of microfilm and a tight wad of twenty-dollar bills, fifty of them. He felt as though he had drunk the shot.

He asked for a microfilm copy

of a back number of the New York Times. When the librarian handed the film strip to him and left him to himself he used the microfilm viewer for the frame of film he had found in the box from the *dybok*.

A formation of letter groups, like an army on review, sprang into being. He copied the groups of letters on the back of a worn envelope that held a month-old letter from his cousin, an old woman who felt it her duty as his lone living relative to lecture him on his wasted life. He had not got around to answering her letter yet.

It took Noland the rest of the afternoon to crack the code and make out the message. The message was from the resident director. Noland had been a resident director himself on the other side. He felt a touch of nostalgia.

The message was for an agent who had just arrived in this country and it told the comrade to get settled in with the one thousand dollars, to frequent singles bars where government employees hung out, to develop contacts with a view to enlisting informants, and to make pickups and deposits on alternate Tuesdays.

Noland thought and smiled, and smiled and thought for a long time.

WITH PART of his windfall, Grant Noland bought second-hand photographic equipment. Carrying the stuff in a big paper bag under a bread wrapper he plucked from a garbage can, he sneaked it into his hotel room. It was a rundown hotel and many of its guests lived on the fringes of crime. He didn't want anyone with a habit to know he had something worth taking and pawning.

Locking and barricading himself inside his room, he improvised a darkroom out of his closet. He blew up the microfilm and on the blowup he painstakingly corrected several letter groups, changing Tuesdays to Mondays for depoosits and Wednesdays for pickups and changing "one thousand" to "five hundred." He reduced this new instruction sheet back down to tininess, dried the frame of microfilm, and put it and five hundred dollars in the magnetic box.

He went out, untied his shoelace a couple of blocks from Lafayette Park, and discovered the need to retie it when he reached the lamp standard. The small box clamped itself inside the base. No one appeared to have been watching him. In case the President was looking out, Noland flipped a salute toward the White House as he left.

He found the answering message in the *dybok* on the day he had rescheduled. He let the respectful complaint stand that five hundred dollars hardly allowed very much in the way of settling in and of frequenting bars in these inflationary times in this capitalistic country, but he changed "five hundred" to "one thousand." And he made his move to maintain and extend his control of the situation.

Noland had the comrade agent respectfully suggest that the lamppost *dybok* seemed too exposed and respectfully request the setting up of a different *dybok*.

The resident director came back with a grudging handout of another thousand. Noland promptly changed this, in word and in deed, to five hundred. The resident director said that he had already come to the conclusion that a new *dybok* was in order, and named one at the Washington Monument.

Noland kept the Washington Monument to himself and gave the agent a *dybok* at the Lincoln Memorial. From now on, the resident director and the agent would not be able to get in touch with each other without going through Grant Noland.

But the comrade resident director had closed by demanding

results of the comrade agent. Noland knew that he had to see to it that the comrade agent got results. He would have to find the comrade agent and feed the comrade agent secret information.

HER NAME, her cover name at least, was Galla Tanner.

Noland was looking for almost anyone but a willowy red-head. He nearly missed realizing that she was making the pickup. He had set up a camera on a tripod and rigged it with mirrors so that when he faced the lens forward, pointing it toward the Lincoln Memorial, he got a good sharp view from the left, the side toward the agent's new *dybok*. It was when she was already walking away that he realized she hadn't just paused to park a wad of chewing gum under the bench.

He gave her a good lead, then folded and telescoped his tripod and stowed tripod and camera inside a flight bag. He shadowed her to her motel room and so learned the name she was going under, Galla Tanner. He went away smiling, sure she hadn't been aware of the shadowing.

Noland had already moved into much more respectable quarters; now he made for his room and rested up before shaving and showering and putting

on his new mod clothes. Tonight he would run into Galla Tanner on the singles-bar circuit.

Again he nearly missed realizing she was who she was. She had changed into a blonde wig and something more sophisticated but no less clinging than the blue jeans of earlier in the day. By the time he caught on, she was at work on a sweaty middleaged swinger who looked to be a draftsman or a communications clerk.

Noland looked on approvingly. The more he watched her put the art of seductive listening to work, the more the person and personality of Galla Tanner got to him. He began to find fault with her choice if not her technique.

If appearances held, this catch of hers had no secret information worth wasting her time and risking her cover on. If appearances deceived, and this catch of hers had anything truly hot to offer, counterintelligence would quickly be on to the leak and trace it to Galla Tanner. Only Noland himself could feed her the right mix of most convincing yet least damaging information.

Noland tried moving in while she waited for her catch to return from the men's room. After some small talk about Washington and the weather,



which seemed interchangeable topics, he told her his name. She looked him over casually and told him her name was Gwen Thomas. He didn't tell her what he did for a living but managed to hint at something hush-hush in whatever his line was.

He thought he had lit a spark of interest but she gave him the soft cold shoulder when the

man returned. She and the man soon left together. Noland didn't follow them.

He ordered a double. He picked it up and looked at it and through it. He set it down unsipped. He got up and went out, leaving it brimming twinklingly in the chatter- and music-shaken air.

Monday took long in coming. He retrieved Galla's message from her *dybok* and decoded it. It jarred him that she had drawn some surprisingly vital information from the man, who turned out to be a White House staffer. But it picked him up that she had seen fit to mention his own name as a possible contact.

To the resident director he had Galla reporting merely that she was on the verge of an important contact and asking for more cash.

To Galla he had the resident director saying that what she had drawn from her catch was old stuff and that in any case the White House staffer was a known liar prone to exaggerate to build up his importance and that she should drop him, but saying that this Grant Noland had cropped up in other sources and seemed an interesting lead to follow up and encouraging her to do her best to cultivate this Grant Noland.

Noland didn't make it easy

for Galla to cultivate him. He gave a dark-haired, dark-eyed divorcee a big play. And even after he let that break up and both he and Galla were on the rebound and kept running into each other in the singles bars, he let his eyes wander toward other lovelies while sitting with Galla.

But it came easier and easier to be less and less hard on her. He had the feeling he was falling and thought she was falling too. But business with pleasure. They both needed some secret information to pass on.

It was easy, with Watergate still in the news.

Talk of Dirty Tricks had brought briefly into prominence in the press mention of the Forty Committee, a supersecret dirty-tricks organization made up of seven top intelligence officers in the government. It had occurred to Noland to wonder at the name—why *Forty* when they were *seven*? He had concluded that Forty was a play on XL, which in turn stood for Extra-Legal.

He let Gwen Thomas draw from him that this was the true meaning of the name, that in spite of the brief exposure and the official denials the Forty Committee was still in operation, and that he was the liaison between the Forty's seven.

Noland convinced her, and through her the resident director, that various otherwise unexplained mishaps, scandals, and embarrassments he pointed to in the newspapers were the doings of the Forty Committee. They got back orders for "More, more!" Headquarters loved to hear juicy gossip.

IT WENT so smoothly for so long that Grant Noland kept telling himself it couldn't last much longer. Maybe that was why he himself gave it away.

Not that he did so consciously. It had happened that, a week earlier, the resident director had passed on from home birthday greetings from her parents to their Galochka, wherever she was. And Noland wakened this evening to the awareness that he had just murmured, "Galochka," in the midst of an embrace.

They broke apart and stared at each other. Both knew there was only one way he could have learned the pet name.

The stare built up like a laser beam between them. Galochka was first to break the stare. She rolled over quickly and grabbed a lipstick from her purse on the night table. She did something to the lipstick container and pointed it at him. It was evidently a weapon of some sort. Noland guessed it

shot either a dart or a spray. And he guessed either would be lethal.

She started to thumb the slide. But she met his eyes again and she hesitated. He could have tried to jump aside or jump Galochka but he stayed as he was.

He spoke quietly. "I've been doing this on my own, Galochka. So it's just between the two of us."

All hung on what Galochka decided now. She could kill him and turn herself in to her embassy, though confessing that she had been a dupe would mean a Siberian labor camp for her. Or she could throw in with him, in which case he would gain a partner and a purpose in life.

They faced each other motionlessly and emotionlessly, then Galochka laughed and tossed the lipstick aside.

"Okay," she said. "But, darling, I don't think we can pass on bum info indefinitely without being found out. It's really a miracle you've got away with it this long."

"Miracle? Skill, my dear Galochka, skill."

She had to laugh at his mock display of injured pride but worry walked her face. "All right, skill. Still, I'm surprised they haven't caught on to it and caught up with us." She

hurried on before he could speak again. "I won't argue with you, though. But, Grant, what do we do now? Because, of course, we'll have to drop this at once."

What dropped was Noland's heart. "Not so fast, Galochka. Think ahead. We need the money. Don't be so quick to throw away a good thing."

"Don't be so quick to throw away our lives."

Noland grimaced. Then he put on a cunning conning grin. "Okay, Galochka. Maybe you're right, maybe we're getting near the windup. Only one more time, then. Just one big touch and we can lose ourselves, set ourselves up somewhere. Change our names. Get lost. How does it sound?"

"Grand, but—"

"Ten grand, you mean."

"Say again?"

"Ten grand. Ten thousand dollars would go a long way to find a hideout."

"Ten grand? Much too risky."

He smiled. At least she was arguing *how much* rather than *whether*. "Just being alive is risky. Listen, Galochka. We ask ten grand for a full list of the Forty Committee's agents and a full description of their assignments. Moscow will think it has its hand on the valve of something that makes Watergate look like a leaky faucet."

Galla sighed a long sigh. "Okay. But I don't like it."

She still didn't like it when he set out to make the drop but she had resigned herself to it. She clung to him at the door. "Promise me you'll be careful."

"I'll be careful."

But he hadn't been as careful as he should have been. Maybe that was because it went so much more simply and quickly now that she knew.

Now that she knew, they had bypassed her *dybok*. They had worked on the message together. She had stayed in her room, making herself prettier for him, while he went out to his *dybok*. He had hurried back, taking only the most elementary precautions to see he had no shadow. But it was not good enough.

He knew that as he knocked on Galla's door. The man who had sauntered after him along the corridor, consulting a slip of paper and glancing at room numbers, now gave up all pretense and concentrated on Noland.

Noland stopped himself from knocking again, eyed the number on Galla's door, snapped his fingers as though realizing his mistake, and made to move further along the corridor. But it was too late.

Galla's door opened and Galla looked out.

Noland shook his head at her and waved her away. "Sorry, miss. Wrong room."

It was no good. A gun jabbed the small of his back.

"It is the right room, Noland." It was the right voice for the gun, harsh and steely. The resident director.

Galla backed away as the gun shoved Noland into the room. A fresh spread of lipstick stood out on her pale face. Noland saw that she shared the sickening certainty that this was the resident director. The door closed and the three of them stood in frozen silence.

The resident director broke the ice. "You are Galla Tanner."

Galla nodded like a mechanical doll.

The resident director chopped a hole in the ice. "Tell me, Galla, how long have you been a fool or a traitor?"

Galla shook her head dumbly.

"No matter, comrade. I will straighten this out myself, here and now. It would go badly for me back home if it were to come out that I have been a dupe."

Galla came out of her trance. Her hand suddenly opened to show her lipstick. She pointed it at that part of the resident director's bulk that showed behind Noland. For the first time the gun in Noland's back eased.

Noland felt the resident di-

rector weighing risks. If he took the gun from Noland's back to point it at Galla, Noland could make a move. If he shot Noland, Galla would get her shot off before he got off another.

The resident director's voice grew soft as solder. "Comrade, if you're not in it with him, prove your innocence. Kill him and we two will work this out."

The lipstick wavered. Slowly, it came to rest.

Noland lurched away from the gun in his back. The lipstick hissed a blur that struck the resident director in the chest.

As the resident director fell, the resident director's gun answered the dart. The shot was no louder than the cough Galla gave as she coughed blood. The resident director's gun had a silencer on it.

The gun slid from the resident director's hand and lay still. The resident director lay still.

Noland had all the time in the world to wipe away his own fingerprints from all the various surfaces he might have touched. He knew what he would do when he finished erasing himself from the room.

He would go out and get so drunk on wine that he would no longer see the lipstick stop wavering, never again watch it come to rest on him.



THE OLD HEAP

Four hubcaps stolen from an ancient car lead letter by letter to an utterly unexpected and utterly lethal finale.

by
**ALVIN S.
FICK**

August 8, 1975

Acme Parking Plaza
2135 Congress St.
Akron, O.

To whom it may concern:

This afternoon when I picked up my car at your parking garage I discovered that all four hubcaps were missing. Obviously they were stolen during the day, because I'm sure all of them were on the car when I left it on C level; the one you

reach from the Orville Avenue ramp.

I spoke to one of the attendants about this, but all he did was shrug his shoulders and say probably the hubcaps fell off on the way in this morning and I didn't notice. Impossible—not all four, anyway. He said the office was closed and wouldn't even give me his name, so I am writing this letter expecting a reply which will enable me to get an adjustment on this.

Yours truly,
Dennis Daggett
14 Pepper Lane
Chatham, O.

August 12, 1975

Mr. Dennis Daggett
14 Pepper Lane
Chatham, O.

Dear Mr. Daggett:

Your letter of August 8 has been brought to my attention. On behalf of Acme Parking Plaza, I express sincere regret for the loss of hubcaps from your car which occurred, you say, while your vehicle was parked at our facility. In view of the activity in the garage section of our Plaza, I find it difficult to believe this could have happened on C level, or anywhere else on our premises, to be quite candid. We employ

an ample staff of trained, dependable and reputable attendants who constantly monitor all areas.

We trust you will have no problem in obtaining reimbursement from your insurance carrier under the terms of your comprehensive coverage.

Again, sorry you incurred a loss.

Cordially,

Elroy R. Kent
Customer Relations
Acme Parking Plaza
2135 Congress St.
Akron, O.

August 15, 1975

Mr. Elroy R. Kent, Customer Relations
Acme Parking Plaza
2135 Congress St.
Akron, O.

Dear Mr. Kent:

I have your letter, and I don't like your Doubting Thomas attitude. I have been parking at Acme Plaza for three years, and I don't like the way you imply I am lying about this matter.

I only use my car going back and forth to work. It never sits on the street. It is parked in my garage—locked, by the way—when I am home. I have always used your indoor parking area instead of the big outdoor lot on

the Congress St. Side. I do this because I take great pride in the way I take care of my car. I have never left it outdoors in the weather.

Don't talk to be about comprehensive insurance. The money that would cost I have been putting into the cash register of Acme Parking Plaza, just so I wouldn't need comprehensive. Why do you think I paid your outrageous indoor fee if not to protect my property?

I am checking on the cost of replacement hubcaps. I will be sending you the bill.

Yours truly,
Dennis Daggett
14 Pepper Lane
Chatham, O.

August 19, 1975

Mr. Dennis Daggett
14 Pepper Lane
Chatham, O.

Dear Mr. Daggett:

In view of the low cost of comprehensive insurance, it seems a little foolish of you not to have it. But that is your business, shortsighted though it may be. It would be pointless for you to send us a bill for your replacement hubcaps, which I doubt you will be able to obtain anyway in view of the age of your car. I spoke to the C level attendant to whom you

complained on August 8. He tells me you drive a 1949 Kaiser.

Really, Mr. Daggett, you can't hope to find new hubcaps for *that*!

Cordially,
Elroy R. Kent
for Acme Parking Plaza

August 20, 1975

Mr. Kent:

You are damned right that it is *my* business whether or not I carry comprehensive insurance, and it certainly is none of *your* business to call me foolish because I don't. And just what the hell do you mean, "It would be pointless for you to send us a bill"?

You have a responsibility in this matter, and I aim to see that you fulfill it.

The tone of your letter of August 19 makes me madder than spit. Who in blazes are you to call me shortsighted? How many shortsighted people do you know who have nursed along, loved and cared for a single automobile for twenty-five years? Let me assure you I can and will find hubcaps. They will cost you a pretty penny, because I am going to charge you for the time I spend searching, and when I find them I expect they may be dented and rusty. Repair, including re-

chroming, will be part of the bill.

On August 19 I stopped in at your office to discuss this matter in person, but your secretary said you were out, and she said she didn't know when you would be back. Bull! Or were you too busy writing that god-damned letter dated the 19th to see me? There's no need for me to ask why I got the same answer from her every time I tried to reach you by phone.

I expect an immediate reply by return mail that you will honor the bill for my new hubcaps. Don't phone about this. I want it in writing. I don't trust you.

Dennis Daggett

P.S. Needless to say, I have found another place to park my car.

DD

August 22, 1975

Mr. Dennis Daggett
14 Pepper Lane
Chatham, O.

Dear Mr. Daggett:

It pains me that I find it necessary to warn you about the intemperate language you are using in your letters. I understand perfectly well the circumstances surrounding the loss of hubcaps from your old car.

It strikes me that, for a person who parked in our facility for three years, you were remarkably unobservant, even singularly inattentive to the prominently posted stipulations regarding vehicles left on our premises. There was not a day you parked at Acme when we at Acme Parking Plaza carried a single iota of responsibility for your vehicle or, for that matter, your person.

It's as simple as that. We have no responsibility. Period.

Cordailly,

Elroy R. Kent

for Acme Parking Plaza

P.S. If your vision is so bad you couldn't see the three-by-four-foot signs stating in letters two inches high THE MANAGEMENT IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR LOSS OR DAMAGE FROM ANY CAUSE TO VEHICLES, CONTENTS, DRIVERS OR PASSENGERS—well, in that case you shouldn't even be on the road with your old heap.

ERK

August 25, 1975

Kent:

There is only one way you can avoid a lawsuit. I stated in my letter of August 20 that I do not trust you. Double that. Prove to me that you and the rest of your crew at Acme are

not a bunch of crooks and I may even forgive your insult to my fine old Kaiser. I'll have you know it is a choice and carefully preserved part of automobile Americana. I can accept anything in the way of insults, but you went too far when you called my Kaiser an old heap.

If you wish to prove your point, take down one of those "prominent" signs next Tuesday and bring it to Rose's Cafe across from your Congress St. entrance. Be there at 6:15 p.m. Don't make me wait, because I have lost my patience. If this keeps you from your 9-to-5 routine, count it as small cost to get me to drop this affair without other courses of action.

I don't recall seeing the signs you mention. You better not bring a freshly painted, trumped-up version, and you know damned well I'd never set foot on Acme property to see one.

Don't forget: September 2 at 6:15 sharp.

Dennis Daggett

P.S. Confirm our appointment in writing, and don't be late.

DD

August 28, 1975

Mr. Dennis Daggett
14 Pepper Lane
Chatham, O.



Dear Mr. Daggett:

Your request of August 25 is ridiculous, but I am going to humor you just so I can see the silly look on your face when you read the sign. I will bring one from the open parking lot rather than one from the inside area. That way you will be able to see the weathering for yourself.

I say I will show up to humor you. Closer to the truth is my desire to get a good look at the priceless pile of old tin and rust you call auto Americana.

Aside from the fact I will be carrying a big sign, you will have no problem identifying me. I will be the one who is laughing—probably uncontrollably after seeing the Kaiser at the curb.

See you on the 2nd, Dennis.
Cordially,
Elroy R. Kent
for Acme Parking Plaza

September 17, 1975

Mr. Dennis Daggett
14 Pepper Lane
Chatham, O.

Dear Mr. Daggett:

Just this morning I reviewed for the first time the correspondence of Elroy R. Kent. I note that you and he exchanged letters during the month of August. Obviously, there was a strong disagreement between you and Acme Parking Plaza regarding the loss of hubcaps from your car while it was parked on C level of our garage.

To the regrets expressed by Mr. Kent I wish to add my own. Further than that, I think it might be in order for me to apologize on behalf of Mr. Kent for his failure to keep the appointment he had with you on September 2. I do not know if you read the Akron papers, since you are a resident of Chatham, but Mr. Kent met with a tragic accident which kept him from meeting you. As you already know, he was planning to bring with him one of the signs from the parking area—a rather unusual agreement on his part, but perhaps in keeping with the strange nature of the correspondence the two of you conducted.

As he was crossing the street,

Mr. Kent was struck by a hit-and-run car. I add with personal sorrow that he died on the way to the hospital without regaining consciousness.

The police have theorized that the sign obscured Mr. Kent's vision, and that he stepped in front of the car which hit him. However, there is so little traffic on Congress St. at that hour I cannot understand how the driver missed seeing Mr. Kent. How could he have missed seeing a man carrying a three-by-four-foot sign? I devoutly hope the police find him.

No one in the cafe saw the accident, and apparently no pedestrians or other drivers witnessed it. As I said above, the street is not very busy at 6:15 of a summer evening.

Perhaps you wondered why Mr. Kent failed to keep the appointment. The police interviewed everyone in the cafe, and took names. Since you were not on that list, I can only assume you were late for the meeting in spite of your insistence on Mr. Kent's punctuality.

My primary reason for writing this letter is to settle the disagreement which culminated in Mr. Kent's untimely death. I must apologize for the manner in which your loss was handled. I cannot say for sure until I

read some of his old files, but I do not believe it was customary for Mr. Kent to be quite so caustic. I'm sure you understand, however, that he had to be firm in his capacity as arbiter in customer problems.

Mr. Daggett, Acme Parking Plaza wishes to make full financial restitution for your loss. We will do so, although I am obliged to reiterate that Mr. Kent was accurate in his assessment that we are devoid of responsibility. Please stop in to see me with your bill, and I will personally hand you a check to cover it.

Sincerely yours,
Robert Winsett, Vice
President
Acme Parking Plaza
2135 Congress St.
Akron, O.

September 19, 1975

Mr. Robert Winsett
Acme Parking Plaza
2135 Congress St.
Akron, O.

Dear Mr. Winsett:

Isn't that a shame about Mr. Kent!

Thanks for the offer to buy my hubcaps, but that won't be necessary. I had a little accident with my Kaiser several days ago, and you know how hard it is to get parts for an old heap like that—especially such things as grills, lamps and so on.

I figured the best thing to do was get rid of it, so I drove it to an auto junkyard. They would only give me \$20!

A couple of days ago I stopped in to see if I could check the glove compartment for a pen I think I missed when I emptied the car. One of the guys in the yard said they had put my car through the crusher and shipped it out for scrap the day before.

I suppose it's on the way to Japan already.

Yours truly,
Dennis Daggett
14 Pepper Lane
Chatham, O.

P.S. Seeing you are in the automobile business in a manner of speaking, I sure would appreciate your dropping me a line if you ever learn of anyone with a 1956 Hudson Hornet for sale—in nice shape, that is.

DD

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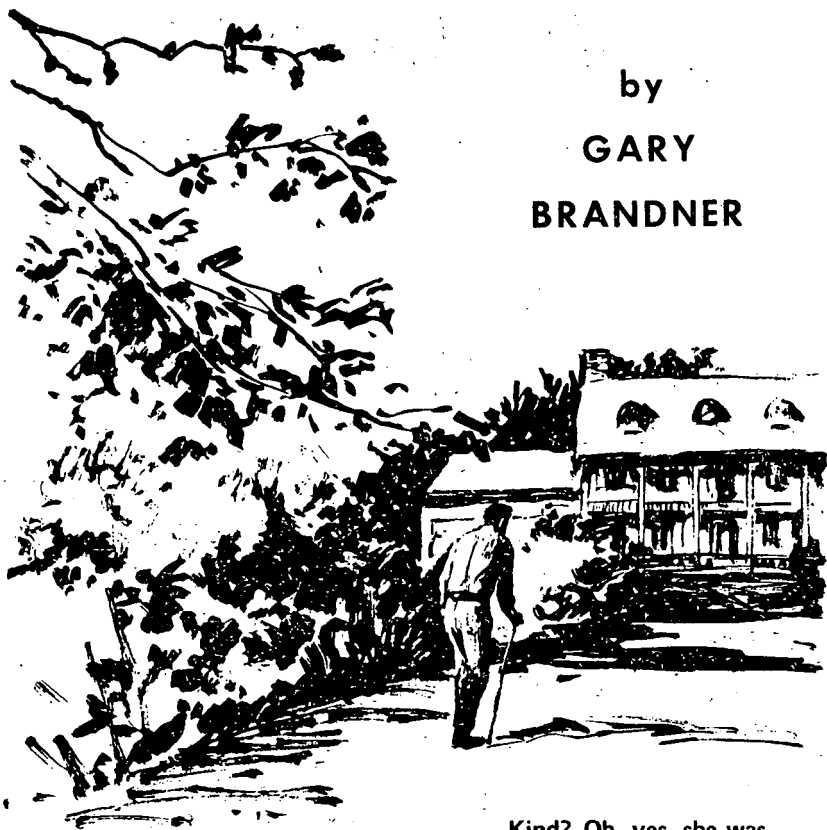
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MARCH—1976

by
**GARY
BRANDNER**



Kind? Oh, yes, she was kind. But she was also very homely. Still, she was certain her husband wouldn't leave her — she had just the cure for him; right to the day he disappeared . . .

THE HALT AND THE DEAD

A THREE-LEGGED DOG yapped at me through the iron gate that closed off the grounds of the big house. While I stood outside saying friendly things to the dog, a huge, solid looking man in a T-shirt and khaki pants lumbered over from a bush he was trimming with heavy shears.

"You want something?" he said. The words came out slow, each syllable carefully pronounced. When he was through talking the man's mouth hung open. He wiped at his chin.

"My name is Dukane," I told him. "I have an appointment to see Mr. Northway."

He thought that over, scratching his head through a thatch of black hair. He repeated my name to himself a couple of times, then nodded and swung the gate open. The three-legged dog, friendly now, frisked about our feet, slowed down very little by the missing foreleg.

"I'll take you to the house," the big man said. "I'm Lionel."

"Glad to meet you, Lionel."

He took a last snip at the bush, laid the pruning shears down, and started up the drive. I followed. The lawn was pool-table green with not a blade of

grass out of place. Bright flower beds with white brick borders provided islands of color. The trees and shrubs were neatly trimmed, but not barbered into unnatural shapes.

"Nice looking grounds."

Lionel beamed with pleasure. "That's what I do. I'm the gardener. You want to see the back?"

"Maybe later," I said.

"The back's pretty too."

"I'll bet it is."

The house was white, trimmed with green. All the houses in the Los Angeles suburb of Vista Verde were white. It was in the zoning laws. The Northway house was two stories high with tall windows and lots of chimneys.

The front door was opened by a middle-aged woman whose homely features were softened by a nice arrangement of her graying hair. At first I thought she was leaning to one side to get a better look at me. Then I saw her spine was twisted.

"Please come in," the woman said when I introduced myself. "Mr. Northway is waiting for you in the study."

Lionel grunted a goodbye and ambled back across the lawn with the dog trotting after him.

I followed the bent woman through a sunken living room, down a short hallway, and into a brown and gold room that smelled of books. On the walls hung rich, old oil paintings. A log fire crackled in the hearth.

Aramis Northway sat near the fire in a tan leather chair with his feet up on a matching ottoman. A blanket covered his frail legs, and his hands lay clasped in his lap.

"Come in, Dukane," he said. "Take a chair." A tremor ran through Northway's voice, and he made an effort to keep it steady. "Forgive me for not getting up, but my joints swell up in this weather."

He spoke to the woman with the crooked back. "Violet, please ask my granddaughter to come in."

The woman bobbed her head and went away, pulling the sliding door closed behind her.

The old man looked at me with eyes that seemed drained of color. He said, "This is the first time I've ever dealt with a private detective, and I don't quite know how to begin."

"Suppose you tell me about the job you want done," I said. "You mentioned on the phone that it has to do with your granddaughter."

"Her husband, actually," Northway said. "Gil McKinnon." He pronounced the name

as though he wanted to get it out of his mouth in a hurry. "He's been living here since they were married two months ago. Now he's gone."

"Gone? How do you mean?"

"Cleared out. Up and left. If it were up to me I'd say good riddance and let's celebrate. But Edith, that's my granddaughter, doesn't feel that way."

"She wants him back?" I asked him.

"Worse. She won't even believe he ran out on her. He's been gone a week now, but Edith still acts like it's some boyish prank."

"Why do you think McKinnon would abandon your granddaughter?" I asked.

"A couple of reasons. Mostly it's the man himself. Gil McKinnon sprays on charm in the morning like cologne. I don't like a man with too much of either. Also, I could see the dollar signs in his eyes the first time Edith brought him around."

"It doesn't figure that he would run out on your granddaughter if he was after her money."

"He's already got it. Edith had an attorney over here last week and signed everything she has into joint ownership, effective the first of the month."

"Wouldn't he wait until he

had the cash in his hands to light out?"

"He was a man in a hurry, Dukane. Once Edith signed the papers he was as good as gone."

"Any idea where to?"

"Nope, except you can bet there's a woman mixed up in it. From what I've heard, McKinnon liked good-looking women, and he wouldn't be content for long with my granddaughter."

"Why do you say that?"

"To begin with, Edith is thirty-six, not pretty, and has never been married before . . . but you'll see for yourself. That is not to say she's a bad woman. Inside she is as beautiful and kind as any you're likely to meet. She has a broken wing complex, probably because of her own injury twenty years ago in the accident that killed her parents."

"This place is always full of convalescent animals, and you've seen the gardener and our housekeeper. Edith hired them. She does Violet's hair for her and spends hours reading to Lionel. Needless to say, they adore her."

"Where did your granddaughter meet McKinnon?" I asked, steering him back to the subject.

"It was down in the Village. That's what we call our Vista Verde shopping district. Edith hates to leave the house, for



reasons of her own, but she does go into the Village to shop every month or so. I'm still not clear how it happened, but she seems to have met McKinnon there somewhere, and the next thing I knew they were married and he was moving in."

THERE WAS a light knock at the door, and the panel slid into the wall on noiseless rollers. A woman with incredibly soft and gentle eyes stood for a moment in the doorway. The rest of her face did not match, as though it

had been put together from remnants. The chin was too bony, the mouth too small, the cheekbones uneven, and the nose thin and pointed.

"Come in, Edith," Northway said. "This is Dukane, the man I told you was coming."

She walked toward me, and for the first time I saw that the calf of her right leg was withered to little more than bone. A metal brace held her foot rigid on the ankle.

"How do you do," Edith said. Her voice matched her eyes—soft and deep. "I understand you're a private detective."

I admitted it.

"I'm really afraid you're going to be wasting your time," she said.

"Maybe I'd better hear exactly what I'm supposed to do," I suggested.

"Find him," Aramis Northway snapped. "Find McKinnon and show my idealistic granddaughter what kind of a man she's married to."

Edith smiled gently at her grandfather. "I'm not worried, dear. I don't know why you should be. Gil and I agreed that we wouldn't stop having personal lives of our own just because we're married."

"That sounds pretty one-sided," Northway said, "considering what your personal life amounted to."

A look of pain crossed Edith's face like a moving shadow.

"Ah, Edie, I didn't mean it that way," the old man said. "It's no secret what kind of a man McKinnon was when you met him, and I doubt that marriage has changed him any."

"You're wrong about Gil," Edith said. "He has many good qualities that people just didn't see. I believe in him."

"Will you still believe in him if Dukane finds him with another woman?"

"That won't happen," Edith said with conviction. "Gil has put all that behind him."

Aramis Northway turned back to me. He looked shrunk-en and old. "You can see what I'm up against. I could use a brandy. Will you join me?"

I said I would be glad to, and Edith limped over to a small bar and poured Hennessy into two grapefruit-size snifters.

The old man held out a trembling hand to show me. "Just look at that. Can't even pour my own drinks any more. Hell, I can't even shave myself. I'm just another of Edith's cripples nowadays."

Edith came back with our drinks. "Don't talk silly," she told him.

We sipped at the cognac, and I decided I'd better go to work.

I said, "Mrs. McKinnon, have you considered holding up the

transfer of your property to joint ownership, at least until your husband is located?"

"That would be rather an insult to Gil, don't you think?"

What I thought was that it wasn't near the insult she was going to suffer if old man Northway was right. I let it go.

"Exactly when was it McKinnon left?" I asked.

"A week ago today," Northway said. "It was nine-thirty or so in the morning. Edith and I were eating breakfast and heard him roar out of here in his sports car . . . the one Edith bought him as a wedding present."

"Do you have the license number handy?"

"If you're thinking of tracing him through the car, forget it," Northway said. "The police called us the next day to tell us it was left on the street overnight down in the Village."

"Doesn't that seem strange?" I asked.

"Not for Gil," Edith said. "He often does impulsive things like that."

"Like abandoning a new sports car?"

"Gil didn't abandon the car any more than he abandoned me. He'll be back soon. You'll see."

Maybe, I thought. Aloud I said, "Since he only drove the car a mile or so into the Vil-

lage, it would seem he hasn't gone too far."

"That's what I keep telling my grandfather," Edith said.

"I never said he went far away," the old man put in. "I just said that wherever he went he's with a woman."

Before they could get into another discussion about McKinnon's good and bad qualities, I said, "If you don't mind, I'd like to have a look at his bedroom."

Edith glanced away for a moment and I thought I saw the trace of a blush. "We were staying in my room," she said. "Come upstairs and I'll show you."

We walked out of the study and up a broad staircase, Edith managing very well on her braced foot.

"I understand you met your husband in the Village," I said.

"Yes, at Keppler's Shoe Store. Gil was a salesman there."

She took me down a hall and into a large, frilly bedroom. The walls were papered in powder blue, flecked with white. A pale blue carpet with an intricate design of darker blue covered the floor. At the near side of the bed lay a rug of thick white fur.

"Which is your husband's closet?" I asked.

Edith pointed to a set of folding doors, nodding her permis-

sion for me to go through it. Inside, the crossbar was heavy with suits, sport coats, and slacks. Half a dozen pairs of shoes stood on the floor.

"Have you checked to see which of his clothes are missing?" I said.

"Most of his things are still here, as you can see. All he took were some sports clothes and toilet articles in a small bag. That's one reason I'm so sure Gil won't stay away long."

While Edith moved to smooth the wrinkles from one of her husband's jackets I opened another door and peered into the bathroom. The cold tile floor gleamed with a fresh wax job, and the fixtures were all cuddly with white fur covers.

"Gil doesn't like it much either," Edith said, reading my mind. "We plan to have the whole upstairs redecorated."

We left the bedroom and headed back downstairs. I said, "Your grandfather tells me the two of you heard your husband's car drive out a week ago. Did anyone actually see him leave?"

Edith put a finger to her lips and frowned. "I don't think so. Violet was in the kitchen preparing breakfast, and Lionel was working on something out in the tool shed. Neither of them could have seen the garage or the driveway. Maybe

somebody next door at the Jellicoes' saw him. I don't know."

I told Aramis Northway I would be in touch, and said goodbye to Edith at the door. Heading down to the street I waved to Lionel, who was unloading fertilizer bags from a pickup truck. He waved back and gave me a big grin. I let myself out the gate and the three-legged dog barked goodbye.

A FEW YARDS down the road I came to a mailbox with the name *Jellicoe* in ornate scrollwork. I headed up the walk toward the white colonial house and was met by a smartly dressed woman on her way out.

The woman put on the coolly polite smile rich people use on tradesman, and I introduced myself. She was unconvinced until I showed her the photograph of my license, which she read carefully.

"What is it I can do for you?" she asked. "I hope it won't take long, I'm late as it is for a meeting of the hospital board."

"Just one question, Mrs. Jellicoe. A week ago today, between nine and ten in the morning, did you see anyone leaving the Northway place next door?"

She frowned for a moment, etching two small vertical lines between her pencilled brows.

"Let me see, that was the

morning it rained, wasn't it." The frown lines erased themselves. "Yes, I remember. That fellow who married Edith went speeding out of their driveway in that noisy little car she gave him. It would have been about that time, because I was out getting the mail."

"Are you sure it was Gil McKinnon?"

"No one else around here drives like that. Is he in trouble?"

"Not that I know of."

"He will be," Mrs. Jellicoe said with assurance.

I walked back out front and climbed into my Chevy. It was just over a mile through the make-believe rural roads to the Village.

All the stores along the short commercial street were designed to look quaint. They had little shingle roofs extending over the sidewalk, small leaded panes instead of show windows, and no electric signs or advertising posters.

Halfway along the street I found Keppler's Shoe Store. Inside, fitting shoes on a woman twice his size, I found Mr. Keppler. I went through the business of identifying myself again, but the proprietor still went to the rear of the store to call Mr. Northway before he would talk to me.

"Yes," he said after getting

the old man's okay, "Gil McKinnon worked here for about three months. I remember quite well the day he met Edith Northway. I always fitted Miss Northway myself; in private, because of her, uh, problem. On this particular day, Gil came in while I was showing her a pair of the conservative style she always bought. He came over and asked if he could make a suggestion.

"Miss Northway is so sensitive about her handicap, that I expected her to get up and leave. But Gil had a charming manner, especially with women, and the first thing you know the two of them are laughing together and he's showing her a bunch of frivolous new styles I would never have tried to sell her. She wound up buying half a dozen pairs from Gil, and he walked her out to the parking lot and put them in the car for her. Less than a month later he quit here and married her."

"Did McKinnon know who Edith Northway was when he first came in and started talking to her?"

"I don't know. He could have."

"Where was he living while he worked for you?"

"I'll check it," Keppler said, and went back to the office. In a minute he returned with a

slip of paper on which he had written an address near Century Boulevard in Inglewood.

"This is where his mother lives," Keppler said, "Mrs. Hannah McKinnon. That's what he gave me for his home address."

I thanked the man and headed north for Inglewood, home of the Forum, Hollywood Park, and L.A. International Airport. As I pulled up at the number Keppler had given me, a 747 thundered overhead and I wanted to duck away from the blast of sound. The jet passed, descending on the north runway, and the roar mercifully diminished. I walked up to the gray stucco house and rang the bell.

The women who answered the door had bitter lines in her face and a bad dye job on her hair. I got the preliminaries out of the way and asked when she had last seen her son.

Hannah McKinnon's mouth curved downward. "Not since he married Miss Richbitch, I'll tell you that for a fact. All the years he flopped here without paying me one red cent, now when he could afford to do his mother a little good, try and find him."

"Your son lived here with you until his marriage?" I asked her.

"Except when he had some

woman or other to sponge off of."

"Then he hasn't been married before?"

Mrs. McKinnon snorted at the thought. "Not Gil. He wasn't about to settle down until he found some woman who could support him in style. I guess he found her."

"Was he seeing anyone special just before he married Miss Northway?"

"There was some floozy in West L.A. Her name was Rikki Boyd."

"Do you have her address?"

"It happens I do because Gil wanted his mail sent there for a spell. She lives at the Tahitian Apartments on Overland."

THE TAHITIAN WAS ON a block of nearly identical apartment buildings, each with its own exotic name. I parked in somebody's reserved space and went into the foyer. The building was the standard square donut with a pool in the center. I found a mailbox with *R. Boyd* printed on the card. *C. Taylor* had been added underneath with a ballpoint pen. The apartment number was 209.

I climbed the stairs and circled the balcony overlooking the pool until I came to 209. I pushed the buzzer and waited. I waited some more and buzzed again. Inside I could hear

sounds of someone moving around, so I thumbed the buzzer a third time.

A redhaired girl in a short velour robe opened the door and blinked out at me. She stifled a yawn.

"Rikki Boyd?" I said.

"Rikki's not home. She's working."

"My name's Dukane," I said, showing her my identification. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

The redhead ignored my photostat, but stepped back and gave me a slow up-and-down. A smile grew on her lips. "Come on in, big fella. I probably can't afford whatever you're selling, but pitch it to me anyway."

She had a good smile. I went in and perched on a metal and plastic chair while she leaned back on the sofa, letting the velour robe take care of itself without hindrance.

"It was really Rikki Boyd I wanted to talk to," I said, "but maybe you can do me some good."

"I'm Chris," she said. "Try me."

"Do you know Gil McKinnon?"

"Curly hair, lots of teeth, Mr. Personality?"

"That sounds like him."

"He was Rikki's roommate before I moved in. I heard he got married. I only met him



once. Not my type. He projects too much."

"When did you meet him?"

"Three weeks ago. A month, maybe. Since Rikki works days and I work nights, we don't often get in each other's way. It's worked out pretty well. I'm going to hate to leave."

"You're moving out?"

"Either that or get a new roommate. Rikki's splitting at the end of the month, and I can't afford the place by myself."

"You say Rikki's at work now?"

"That's right. The Venus Camera Studio on Western near Santa Monica."

"Thanks."

"I work at the Purple Pussycat," Chris said. "I'm a dancer."

"You have the equipment," I observed.

"Drop in some time. After two I'm on my own."

"I may do that."

"Dukane?"

"Yeah?"

"You know anybody who might be interested in a roommate?"

"I'll ask around," I said.

"Thanks. See you, big fella."

The Venus Camera Studio was a small concrete building between a porno book store and a head shop. Red painted letters on the front wall promised:

NUDE MODELS! INSIDE! LIVE! Beyond the door was a partitioned cubicle with a curtain behind it. A grubby kid with a broken nose charged fifteen dollars to let me into the curtained-off "studio."

"You got a camera?" he asked.

"No."

From under the counter he took a battered Brownie and handed it to me. "Got to have a camera," he said. "It's the law. Five dollars more to use ours."

I passed over another bill, took the camera, and pushed in past the curtain. The room was bare with unpainted concrete walls and a raised platform in the center. On the platform a girl with streaked blonde hair sat in a folding chair reading a paperback novel. She wore a see-through negligee over black bikini underwear. When I came in she stood up, peeled off the negligee, and dropped it with the novel on the chair.

"Hi," she said. "How do you want me?" Topless, bottomless, or let it all hang out?"

"You're fine the way you are," I said. "Actually, I'm just here to talk."

The blonde sighed and sat back down in the chair. "It's your money. Last week I had a guy just came to drool. Stood there with his mouth open for thirty seconds, then shuffled

out again. It takes all kinds. What do you want to talk about?"

"You *are* Rikki Boyd?"

"Yeah. Do I know you?" She examined a fingernail thoughtfully.

"We know some of the same people."

"Who, for instance?" She examined another nail.

"Gil McKinnon."

She forget her nails and looked at me quickly. "Do you know where he is?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"No such luck. I haven't seen Gil in over a week." She went back to her fingernails.

"Where was that?"

"Right here. He doesn't usually come down when I'm working, but this time he wanted to tell me some good news."

"Like what?"

"None of your business." She glared at me.

"You know he's married?"

"What of it?" She shrugged. "I've known Gil longer than she has. And a lot better."

"Are you planning to go away with McKinnon after the first of the month, Rikki?"

"How did you know?"

"I'm a detective, I know everything. If I were you I wouldn't count on the boyfriend showing up."

I went out the back way,

leaving the rented camera with a wino who stood there to collect them. I walked around the building to my car and drove south toward Vista Verde.

THE DOG with three legs seemed to remember me, and he wagged happily when I came up to the Northway gate. Lionel wasn't so quick, and he had to think a minute before recognizing me as the same Dukane who had been there earlier. Up at the house Edith McKinnon opened the door for me and led me into the study, where her grandfather seemed not to have moved since I left him.

"I didn't expect to see you back so soon," the old man said.

"Sometimes things fall into place in a hurry."

"Have you found McKinnon?"

"Not exactly, but I have a good idea where he is."

"Well, *where*?" the old man demanded. "Where did he go?"

"Gil McKinnon didn't go anywhere," I said. "He's still here."

"But we heard him drive off last Wednesday morning."

"You heard his *car* drive off. Nobody saw him, except your neighbor, Mrs. Jellicoe. And it was mostly assumption on her part. It was raining that day, and it would be hard to recognize the driver with the top up on a sports car."

"If it wasn't McKinnon who drove out of here, who was it?" Northway asked.

"We know it wasn't you or your granddaughter, since you were eating breakfast. Your housekeeper was in the kitchen, so the only one out of sight was—"

"Lionel?" the old man broke in. "Why on earth would Lionel do a thing like that?"

"Why don't we ask him?" I said.

"By all means. Edith, bring Lionel in here, please."

The girl limped out of the study, and in a few minutes came back with the shambling gardener. Neither Aramis Northway nor I said anything while she was gone.

The old man spoke to the gardener. "Lionel, did you drive Mr. McKinnon's car out of here last week, down to the Village? Tell me the truth, now."

Lionel stared open-mouthed at Northway, then looked around at Edith and me as though hoping one of us would help him with the answer. Finally he turned back to the old man and nodded his head up and down.

"Why, Lionel?" said Northway. "Why did you do that?"

The gardener shrugged his heavy shoulders and said nothing.

To me Northway said, "Very

well, but that still doesn't explain where McKinnon is. What did you mean when you said he's still here?"

"Lionel can tell us that too. How about it, Lionel, where is Mr. McKinnon?"

"He was a bad man," Lionel said in a monotome.

"Was?" Northway repeated.

"Is he dead, Lionel?" I asked, keeping my voice calm.

The gardener stared down at his muddy shoes.

"Are you going to show us where he is, or will we have to dig up *all* your flower beds?"

He looked up at me with alarm in his childlike face. "No, I'll show you. He's under the new begonias. Please don't dig up all my flowers."

Edith moved quickly to the big man's side and took his hand in both of hers. "They won't dig them all up, Lionel. Don't worry, I won't let them."

"Thank you, Miss Edith."

Aramis Northway stared at them for a moment, then turned his unbelieving eyes on me. "Lionel killed him?"

"Well, no. Lionel buried him. Your Miss Edith killed him."

There was a silence that lasted five heartbeats, then Edith spoke in a dry, dead voice. "I suppose you can prove what you're saying."

"I think so. If we pull up the white rug, the one that was

moved from your bathroom to the bedroom, we should find blood stains. Maybe there's even a trace of it on your grandfather's razor, if that's what you used."

"Why would I kill him?" she said. "I loved Gil."

"I'm sure you did," I said. "But you didn't trust him. You suspected he was seeing another woman, and you had Lionel follow him. Last week Lionel followed him into a model studio and saw the other woman. Maybe he heard them talking through the curtain there, or maybe you guessed what your husband was up to. Either way, when you knew McKinnon planned to leave you, you killed him. It was easy to talk Lionel into burying the body for you. Then the next morning you had him drive out in McKinnon's car at a time when you knew Mrs. Jellicoe would be out at her mailbox."

Edith patted Lionel's hand tenderly, then walked over to stand by her grandfather's chair.

In a broken voice the old man said, "Edith; I can understand why you killed him, but I will never know why you ever married the man."

"I thought I could help him," she said. "I thought what Gil had—the irresponsibility and the craving for women—was an affliction. Like Vi's back and Lionel's mind. And my leg. I thought if I could give him understanding he would grow to love me. I was wrong."

By the time I had given my statement to the police it was getting dark. I drove across town, thinking I could use a night out where there was music and laughter and the people were whole.

A good place to start, I decided, would be the Purple Pussycat.

Next Month's Headliners

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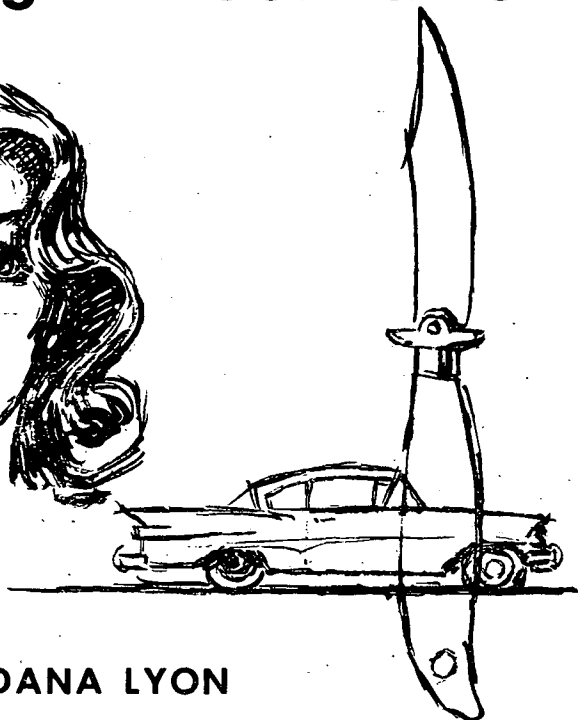
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A New Exciting Short Story

My Daughter Germaine



by DANA LYON

The perfect crime is not merely the successful murder. It is one where murder is unsuspected.

LET ME TELL YOU about my daughter Germaine. She is my only living relative. And I must find a way to kill her.

It is incredible that I could have known her as long as I have and been so totally unaware of all that was going on inside her. The psychologists would say her early upbringing

was at fault, but it was not much different from that of many other women who lead normal lives afterward.

Birth into a prosperous family, love and attentive care; a brother born four years later who took every particle of attention in the household to keep him alive because of his

congenital ashmatic condition; his death at the age of seven and grief for him that almost totally excluded Germaine; a divorce; a change in finances so that her mother had to become a career woman; private schools . . .

Categorized like this, yes, it is easy to see what may have made her the way she is, but on the other hand, while many women have had much the same early background, no other woman has become what Germaine is—a totally destructive force.

Let me tell you—

* * *

What no one ever understood about Germaine was that, under the gentle smile, the lovely face, the warm demeanor, lay a heart as cold as the ice of Antarctica and as black as a midnight storm. She was sweet and gentle and lovely, but the hatred within her was deep and bitter and ineradicable.

Why? I do not know. I did not understand it myself for many years—no, I'll put it differently—I was not *aware* of it for many years. I did not tie together the many things that happened in our family because, as I had told her more than once after her brother died and her father no longer lived

with us, she was my only comfort.

"Am I really, Ma-ma?" she asked. She always called me that, with the accent on the last syllable, as if her name alone was enough to give her a French background. "Am I *really*?"

Then she would allow me to kiss her, and the kiss would never be satisfying. She did not respond. She smiled, and asked if she could do something for me, and would bring me a hot water bottle for my headache when she knew I wanted ice, and would bring me flowers from the hills nearby when she must have known I was allergic to them, and would repeat phone messages to me that she knew were incorrect—things hardly noticeable by themselves.

And what about the cat that scratched her once? Smothered to death in an old starch box with a cover. She told me, regretfully, that she was playing house with it. And then there was the time later on that she sent a cable to her father in Europe and signed my name, telling him that she was dead. She never admitted it, but allowed him to think that I was trying to get "even" with him for deserting us. He did not desert us; our marriage simply dissolved and he found someone else and gave me child support,

so why would I get even with him?

That was *her* purpose in life, not mine. I should have seen it sooner, but what undevious person ever recognizes deviousness in others?

She was getting even with life and with everything and everyone in it and that was the total purpose of her entire being. Did it start with little Dick's birth and death? *Oh my God, his death—she didn't, she couldn't, but what about his missing medicine during his last attack?* No, I cannot believe it. But he was the one who was getting the attention. Not Germaine.

And yet—the sweetness, the gentleness. Everyone loved Germaine, her teachers, her schoolmates—but wait. Wait. Miss Thompson. The only one who ever gave her a D on her report card, the only teacher who ever left the school under a cloud of black gossip.

"That D was a lie," Germaine told me steadily. "You know I always get good marks, Ma-ma. But she didn't like me. She was jealous of me."

"Jealous?"

"Because she's so homely. And I'm not. And she'll never be married, as I will be. People love me and she can't stand it."

"But darling, a grown woman being jealous of a little girl and

being so unfair as to give her bad marks because of it? Are you sure? No, of course not. You mustn't dwell on such things. Perhaps I'd better get in touch with her and find out why she gave you such a mark."

She looked at me obliquely. "You'll never find out," said Germaine. "And you shouldn't think I tell lies." But Miss Thompson's life was destroyed.

The day after I questioned my daughter's veracity, she did not come home from school, and by seven o'clock that night I was frantic. I had been in touch with the police and they were doing their best. Finally they found her at a friend's house—a new friend I had known nothing about—where she had been invited to spend the night.

"But I called you, Ma-ma," she said. "Don't you remember? And you said I could stay there." I told her no, she hadn't (could I ever have been that absent-minded? I wondered. No, she was just being a naughty little girl and didn't want to admit that she'd forgotten to call me) and then other things began to happen. Still, I did not believe that my Germaine, the lovely child with the winning ways, could be anything but what she seemed.

Then there was the one time I had an opportunity to marry

again—a good man, a kind man, one who would have made a happy stable home for us. But not after Germaine told me that he had made advances to her. I did not even ask him about this. She was too innocent, too truthful, too unwilling to bring harm to anyone. She simply, according to her, “felt I ought to know”.

Of course, he didn't make advances to her—she was only fourteen and he was in love with me. It was not until years later, after he married someone else, that I learned what the truth was when I met him casually one day (by now we were like strangers) and he asked me why I had suddenly turned against him. I believed him then but at the time it occurred, I was still believing my innocent child. Why is innocence so important? Why do we try to keep our children in this cocoon of unawareness of life? Innocence, like virginity, is admirable in youth, incongruous in maturity.

It is easy to look back, to believe that hindsight is the same as present sight, and that the mistakes we made way back then should have been as clear to us as they are now. But it is only the accumulation of experience that eventually give us the insight to understand that what we did, the decisions

we made, long years before, should never have been made.

Then too, of course, there is always the blind spot where our loved ones are concerned. The wife who cannot believe that her husband is a lecher or a drunk or a pathological liar. She loves him, therefore all others must be wrong while he is right. Then there are the children who believe that their parents can do no wrong—the devoted friends who trust each other but never others—the one who says, “well, I've known Mary longer than you, therefore I believe her, not you.”

So I did not understand for a long time that people were destroyed by Germaine in ways that were masked by the shroud of her deviousness. True, she was beautiful in the soft, feminine, purified way that Southern women used to look and be, a kind of innocence that came from within and seemingly could not be simulated—for if that mask of beauty should ever be altered by accident or age, it would make no difference. It was her inner core of kindness and charm and thoughtfulness that acted in her behalf. No one could ever believe evil of her.

Except one—the prosecutor who tried her for the murder of her husband.

Germaine's husband died in

bed, from smoke inhalation. The house did not burn down, as perhaps it was intended to. Oddly enough, the fire started in the upstairs hall, Germaine escaped and her husband died. It was conceded that she had been through a terrible experience, what with the fire, the grief for her husband, the destruction of part of her home.

But the police became interested in why she had escaped and he had not. Interested in his large insurance policy, interested enough to have an autopsy performed on his body and to discover that he had enough barbiturates inside him to have put him in a stupefied sleep for hours. Suicide? No. (And a fire starting by itself in the upstairs hall, close to the bedroom door where he was sleeping with his wife?) Too much coincidence. A drugged sleep, if induced by himself, then why and how the fire?

Why hadn't Germaine called an ambulance, the police, the fire department, sooner than she did? It was a neighbor who saw smoke pouring out of an upstairs bedroom window and called for help. Where was Germaine, what was she doing? How could she leave her husband to die in a burning house? Thus the reasoning of the State.

The prosecutor worked hard at convicting her. "This monstrous woman, this innocent looking murderess, this woman who took all she could from her devoted husband and then got rid of him, a man many years her senior, and is now in possession of everything he worked all his life to obtain and to enjoy."

I was in the courtroom every day. I watched her. I saw a subtle change come over her as she listened to the rhetorical outbursts of the prosecutor. It is unlikely that anyone else noticed a change in her. It was only that I knew her so well. I was still unaware of the inner core of my child, simply because I was unwilling to believe.

But little tongues of doubt were flicking at me here and there, the beginning of the accumulation of strange incidents throughout her life, some of them far separated from others, so at the time they seemed like separate occurrences, not bound together by repetition. But now. Now . . .

Her husband had always seemed kind enough, though, as I sat there listening to the almost obscene accusations of the prosecutor, I remembered little things about their relationship, as if he, different from all others who had known her, was

beginning to be aware of her propensities.

There was a kind of scorn in his attitude, a lessening of respect, an indifference to her charming ways, her touted selfishness and kindness toward others, as if only he could see deep into her and know that the world was wrong and he was right. Too, there was a strange kind of fear in his relationship with her, apprehension that he would not acknowledge even to himself, an inevitable obeying of her little light-hearted commands, obeying them unwillingly but of necessity.

With her perceptiveness, surely Germaine was aware of his discovery of her deepest self. She would never have killed him for what he owned or merely because she no longer wished to be married to him—but she would not have hesitated for a moment to avenge herself on him for what she considered his slighting attitude toward her. His knowledge of her. *No one must touch Germaine!*

I sat in the courtroom, watching her and aware, as no one else was, of the slight change in her facial muscles, the minute shift of her shoulders from relaxed to upright, her whole being on guard against the demeaning nature of what was

being proclaimed about her. Within me I began to tremble.

I feared not for her but for the man who was denouncing her. It was then that full and total awareness came upon me, a lifetime suddenly exposed in a terrifying flash. In this, my daughter's twenty-fifth year of life, at last I knew what she was—a destroyer of people. A destroyer of those who dared to pierce the inner core of her being, to discover what dwelt there, and to belittle it.

She did not always destroy by murder, but she destroyed whatever it was that was the seed of their existence—by clever gossip, by a word here and there spoken so innocently that no blame could ever attach it to her, by depriving people thus of their livelihoods, of their faith and trust in those who meant the most to them, by annihilating their belief in themselves—the worst crime of all.

So now, with a very faint smile on her face, she sat and listened to the prosecutor denounce her as a monstrous murderess who had cold-bloodedly killed her husband for his possessions.

She was acquitted.

There simply was not enough evidence to counteract the aura of innocence and childlike goodness that emanated from

the woman in the dock. It was then that I had to acknowledge to myself that the jury was wrong, the defense lawyer was wrong, the prosecutor was right—and so was I. But to what purpose?

The following week, the prosecutor who had so vilified her in public was dead, killed by a hit-run driver. A cream-colored car driven by a woman, late at night, as he was about to enter his home. That was all the police had to go on. The driver was never found, but I knew who she was, for she had borrowed my car for her purposes—what better way to evade responsibility than to put it on my shoulders?

Germaine knew that I knew—but as long as I had a home of my own I could never be completely under her control, therefore she set about destroying my life. She was frightening because she was unreadable. There was no way to curtail the acts of which she was capable, no way to warn those who had fallen into her disfavor. Her life was a living blackmail—*Be kind to Germaine or you will suffer!*

After the acquittal, she came to me and said, "Ma-ma, I would like you to come and live with me. The house is too big for me alone and it would be nice for us to live together."

I was appalled, for this was the last thing on earth I desired. She and I had grown apart, she was no longer the myth that my love had made of her, the delightful girl-child who was always doing things for others and seemed to find joy in doing them so that some of my friends would say, "My dear, if only I had a daughter like Germaine I'd never have to worry again!"

But of course I knew why she wanted me to live with her. I had begun to learn about her and she had, with unfailing instinct, discerned my knowledge. She knew that inwardly I shrank from her. This was an insult to the Germaine that dwelt within her.

"Thank you, dear," I said. "But I'm quite happy the way I am. My apartment, my friends, my job. You are grown up now, and free, and we must each lead our own lives."

Nothing happened for a while. Apparently she accepted my decision without further argument. Then one day I came down with a serious virus, and Germaine came to my apartment and cleaned it up for me and cooked me suitable meals and changed my bed linen and watched over me until I was quite well again.

At which time I found that I was jobless. Germaine had used

my personal stationery to type a letter of resignation to the president of my company, and had forged my signature at the end. There was no way I could countermand this resignation ("Due to ill health I feel that I cannot continue with my work, as the doctor has told me I must rest at home for a long time to come").

Without a job, I was without an income. I could still refuse to live with Germaine but, if I did, what other means would she take to enforce her command? And why was she doing it? Simply because she knew that I was now aware of what she was and she must therefore keep me under her constant supervision? Or perhaps to avenge herself because I knew too much about that terrifying psyche of hers? We did not communicate on this subject. We did not need to.

So it was safer for me to give in now than to rouse that slumbering rage that could destroy at the faintest of slights.

* * *

I AM A prisoner here in this spacious mansion. Oh, I am free to come and go as I will, but I must walk carefully on delicately structured eggs, for if I should say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, or even not

speak at all when she wishes me to speak, retribution will surely catch up with me.

The servants must be trained to perfection (that is my domain), the routine of the household must be inviolate, I must rise and go to bed when Germaine decides. "You must get your full rest, Ma-ma, dear, and it will be good for you to rise early and do your morning exercises with me, then a cold shower, and then a hearty breakfast. *N'est-ce pas?*"

My life is ordered. My mind is directed, my body forced to do another's will, my soul deprived of its freedom of choice. I must witness the destruction of those nice women Germaine chooses to play bridge with who have somehow or other unknowingly crossed Germaine in such a way that they must be punished by the goddess who rules our universe. The servants are punished by her regretful refusal to give them references, the delivery boys are punished by carefully dropped words to their employers. It goes on and on.

When will the next murder come? After her husband's, after the prosecutor's. Or will she content herself with destruction minus death? Will my own death be next? I must *anticipate* what Germaine wants before she knows it herself. What she

does know is that her inner being has been revealed to me and that while I will do nothing overt about it, the mere fact of my knowing what she is is enough for her to mete out punishment.

When will the punishment take on broader dimensions?

When will I die innocently in my sleep or as the result of some unforeseeable accident? Or will she be able to have me "put away", as the saying is for my own best good?

One cannot live like this.

So now I, too, am about to become a murderess.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (Act of August 12, 1970: Section 3685, Title 39, United States Code)

- Title of Publication: Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine.
- Date of Filing: Sept. 17, 1975
- Frequency of Issue: Monthly.
A. Annual Subscription Price: 24 issues \$14.00.
- Location of Known Office of Publication: 8230 Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, L.A., CA 90048.
- Location of the Headquarters of General Business Offices of the Publishers: 8230 Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, L.A., CA 90048.
- Names and Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor:
Publisher: Leo Margulies, 1221 Sunset Plaza Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90069.
Editor: Sylvia Kleinman, 1221 Sunset Plaza Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90069.
Managing Editor: None.
- Owner: Renown Publications, Inc., 8230 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90048: Leo Margulies, 1221 Sunset Plaza Dr., Los Angeles, CA 90069: Sylvia K. Margulies, 1221 Sunset Plaza Dr., Los Angeles, CA 90069.
- Known Bondholders, Mortgagees and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages or other Securities. (None).
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- Extent and nature of circulation.

	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	Actual Number of Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
A. Total No. Copies Printed (Net Press Run)	87,258	Feb., 1976: 98,079
B. Paid Circulation		
1. Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors and Counter Sales	25,910	Feb., 1976: 27,221
2. Mail Subscriptions	3,060	Feb., 1976: 3,104
C. Total Paid Circulation	28,970	Feb., 1976: 30,325
D. Free Distribution by Mail, Carrier or other means		
1. Samples, complimentary, and other free copies	530	Feb., 1976: 311
E. Total Distribution (Sum of C and D)	29,500	Feb., 1976: 30,636
F. Copies not Distributed		
1. Office use, left-over, unaccounted, spoiled after printing	5,089	Feb., 1976: 4,694
2. Returns from news agents	52,669	Feb., 1976: 62,749
G. Total (Sum of E & F—should equal net press run shown in A)	87,258	Feb., 1976: 98,079

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MARCH—1976

SECRET WEAPON

by HELENE JUAREZ
PHIPPS

Jenny was eager to marry Beto—but lurking on the balcony was a man ready to destroy both them and their love.



HERE I STAND beneath the portico of the inn at San Angel—like old times, waiting for the bus to come in from Mexico City. The bougainvillea cascading down from the overhanging tiles gives me natural cover from the passersby and the occupant of the pink-walled villa across the road. In the filtered shade, I can move freely with-

out fear of being recognized. However, I doubt Jenny would know me if she passed me on the street.

The silver bus with the red arrow stenciled on its side drives up and spills out a handful of *turistas* on their way to the *Bazaar Sabado*, the Saturday market. No one gets off that I know.

Jenny should have been aboard that bus. But that's my wife for you. She would be late for her own wedding. She was late for ours.

Ours had been a simple, civil ceremony. The judge was outraged that Jenny kept both of us waiting. But she was too involved in the student revolution. She was out painting signs on the buses that we had commandeered. We had stolen three, blown up five, overturned several to blockade the *periferico*, the freeway that leads in and out of the capital. Jenny had finally put down her paintbrush to come and marry me. I wondered what was detaining her now? Our little rebellion was over, the fire was ashes.

A boy comes up, barefoot, selling papers—fair-skinned, dark eyes, a *mestizo*. I give him a few centavos for *El Sol*. The headlines in five years haven't changed. There are still murders, a host of normal deaths, affairs of passion and perversion, shock expressed by the government officials about the kidnapping of governors' sons and the scions of wealthy banking families. Beto, I am sure, is involved in some of those. He has graduated from student disturbances.

Beto is no older than I, still in his thirties. As a revolution-

ary, a dreamer, he is slowly moving up to more pressing matters. The student revolution was a proving ground for the two of us. But Beto has a future. I am finished.

The paper boy sets the afternoon edition in front of me, upside down. I ask him to right it for me. He laughs and runs off. His laughter is pure bravado. My appearance terrifies him. I am used to that.

Across the street, in front of the side gate that leads to the villa's tower apartment—where I lived, once—a block of ice is melting on the sidewalk. Lavender blossoms from the jacaranda behind the garden wall are settling on the ice, making it look like an ornament for a festive table. The ice, undoubtedly, is for the champagne. But the table will hardly be festive. At least, not for me. I haven't been invited.

Why doesn't Beto come down to pick up his ice? Too lazy, or too frightened? He has no way of knowing that I am standing here—waiting, watching.

If the nurse at the hospital hadn't brought the underground papers to my bed, I would not have found out about the wedding plans. I feel a smile forming on my face, but my wired jaw won't let me complete it. Nurse Lopez didn't know, when she showed me the

item, that Jenny Golden is my wife. She doesn't know my name is Golden, either. Nor do the doctors, the therapist, the attendants, nor even the members of the staff that sign me in and out. They call me *Senor X*, the clown. They think I'm funny. They laugh at my attempts to get around. They laugh to encourage me. I don't speak to them.

Once in a while, I talk to my nurse. Lopez suspects that I had something to do with the student revolution. She has put two and two together. She came to the hospital as a novice five years ago, about the time they brought me in, barely breathing. There were so many of us that night the hospital lost count. I am not the only one who stays on, nameless.

Nurse Lopez is interested in me. Each time she shows me a news item about a kidnaping, or an execution, she watches my face to see my reaction. I give her no clues whatsoever.

It was she who told me that Jenny is going to marry Beto. He is one of the young revolutionaries, she whispered in my good ear. He has a big future. Then she slipped the mimeographed sheets into the drawer of my bedside table. She is a revolutionary, herself, at heart. But she doesn't have the courage that we had. She

doesn't know that Beto is my closest friend, or was, until he drove the stolen bus that sent me into—oblivion.

I can see that bus, dumped on its side—*MUERTE A LOS TRAIADORES*—scrawled in red paint to look like blood with all Jenny's artistry across the back panel. The last thing I saw as they were hoisting me onto the ambulance stretcher was the bus, upended like some great dead beetle, and Beto running off into the forest of Chapultepecq, tracer bullets from the tank guns streaking after him as he fled.

The ambulance passed by the doors of the American Embassy—I knew it by the eagle crest—on the way to the hospital. Before I lost consciousness, even then, I knew that I would never call on my consul for help. There wasn't enough left of me to bother him about.

A priest stands beside the cake of ice, an address book in his hand, looking at the stairway that winds upward to the tower apartment. He looks down at the ice melting at his feet, as though debating whether to pick it up and carry it with him or not. He would dampen his black robe. He decides against it. The lavender petals are floating off onto the walkway as the sun at high

noon bears down like a branding iron.

A girl in well-fitting jeans, a straw *Zapatista* hat over her straight blonde hair, rounds the corner and joins the priest. She is wearing a light cotton blouse, tightly bound at her waist by a colorful woven belt. She looks as she always did, somewhat disheveled, not too clean, with that intense, searching expression on her sun-lined face, still seeking a cause to champion. But that's my same Jenny. The majority of students have gone back to their books. The rebellion is forgotten. But Jenny hasn't yet outgrown it.

Somehow, I expected her to age, to show some visible evidence of grief, even to display a touch of respectful mourning, a discreet black band, perhaps. For a moment, I am sorry she doesn't know that I am still alive and rarely leave the hospital, except on an occasion like this. To have her see me as I am—nothing in the world could make me reveal myself to her.

I can't blame her too much, but being without me all these years, should have taken some of the lightness from her.

Traffic on the way to the *Bazaar* has picked up. The street in front of me is lined with cars wearing foreign stickers on the windshields, all honking in unison. A nerve-

wracking litany. The black fumes of Pemex gasoline fill the air.

Pedestrians and drivers alike are gasping and choking. My jaw begins to ache, as I try not to sneeze. With all the confusion, the cars, the trucks, the jostling people, I feel it safe to cross the street. I hover in the shadows of the wall, close enough to hear Jenny's low-pitched voice, her Midwestern-accented Spanish.

"Are you sure it's the right address?" she asks the priest. "I got off at the wrong stop." She is pretending. She is trying to throw him off. She doesn't want him to know that she once lived in that apartment with me.

"He said you'd been here before. Doesn't it look familiar?"

"I don't know." She hesitates. "I didn't recall its being so pink. The balcony could have been added."

You're lying, Jenny. You don't want him to know you've been married before. Otherwise a priest would not perform the ceremony.

The priest is getting impatient. The heels of his black boots lift off the ground as he stands on tiptoe. "I can see a black cape hanging on what looks like an antler inside the door. Does your *novio*—your fiancé—wear a black cape?"

"I don't think so," Jenny

says. "But he has many changes, you understand? I haven't seen them all."

For shame, Jenny! Don't you remember? It was I who always wore the cape. You used to think it romantic, dashing. I was the one who had style. Beto was always the lumpy one, the pelado. That's my cape, Jenny, hanging at the top of the stairs. Beto appropriated it after I disappeared. Just as he took over my work, my possessions, my apartment. Nurse Lopez brings me all the news. I know all about him.

"Beto should have left the door open," Jenny says. "He keeps things locked. But for us. . .," She starts running up the stairs. The priest vaults up; two steps at a time, after her. His cassock wings out behind him. They go inside and close the door.

Only then do I move out into the open and tackle that awkward stairway. I go up the steps slowly. My artificial leg dislikes inclines, raised platforms, any change in elevation. Going downhill is worse. I, too, think about the ice. It will be melted to the size of an egg before we all come down. I don't like to think about my own painful descent.

By the time I reach the top, the door is locked. I see the huge brass nailheads and the

knocker in the shape of a woman's hand. I can't reach up to grasp it. But it doesn't matter. It would be embarrassing all around, if I walked in and surprised them.

The floor of the veranda is covered with straw matting that muffles the sound of my footsteps. I walk halfway around the outside of the apartment without being seen and I reach a side window that is shaded by a hanging fern. The tendrils brush my cheek softly, like a caress. For just a second, I recall the touch of Jenny's hands. My eyes fill and my vision blurs, but then I am distracted by the sounds coming from inside the room.

Beto has come in from the kitchen with a bottle of champagne, three glasses jingling in his hands. He carries them awkwardly and doesn't know where to put them down. He is really quite graceless. The priest has taken out his book and is about to start the ceremony. Jenny gestures for Beto to set the bottle and the glasses on the onyx table.

I can't hear her, but she is obviously saying, "Let's get on with it." That's what Jenny would say. She always knew what she wanted. Five years ago, she wanted me.

She has to have Beto now. She can't conceal her eagerness.

Beto is wearing army fatigues, his pants hiked up almost to his knees. He bends over and rolls down the legs of the grey-green trousers.

He has two solid, muscular, sturdy legs, hardened from marching the workers through the fields and across the jungles. He has light grey eyes, fading from overexposure to spotlights and from too much strong drink. His square, stubborn jaw looks as if it were carved from lava rock. I hate him.

He is standing very close to Jenny while the priest is making his signs, saying his words. Jenny and Beto have erased me from their lives. Beto is not much taller than Jenny, but his shoulders are overpowering. He stands straight and proud. All of him. Five fingers on each hand. His toes comfortable inside his shoes.

His jaw is underlined by a clipped fringe of beard, peppered with grey. He has the look of a friendly Satan. But isn't Satan always friendly at first? He had been friendly, very friendly, to me, that Beto. But he shouldn't have stolen Jenny from me. I know now that he always coveted her. When they shot the tires out from under us, I wondered then if Beto had purposely made me sit in the back by the arsenal.



I guess Jenny will be happy with Beto. But how *can* she? She will have to be hiding out with him always. Look at him, a hunted man, unable to venture out to a chapel for a proper wedding. Undercover always. I wonder if Jenny ever held some kind of a funeral for me. A service? Did she mourn? Did she grieve? Or did she go directly into Beto's arms?

Before the end of the ceremony I look away. I don't want to see them in an intimate em-

brace. I wait for the priest to leave. He is a jolly fellow. He drinks too much. He is overstaying his time and soon it will be getting dark. Doesn't he know that newlyweds want to be alone?

The priest finally leaves. He staggers slightly as he walks down the stairs. His cassock gets in the way of his feet. He is really laughable. As I watch him, I hope he falls. But he is steadier by the time he reaches the bottom step. I turn and look back through the window. Jenny and Beto are taking one last sip of champagne and then they move swiftly into each other's arms.

I can't wait. I fire quickly. Through the glass, the bullet strikes its mark. I aim for no vital parts. I want Beto to die slowly. I shoot again and again, at his right arm, his leg, his jaw. He falls heavily to the floor. Jenny throws herself down on his prostrate body. She is sobbing so loudly she can't hear me as I move from the balcony to the head of the stairs.

I make the long painful descent down to the spot where the ice used to be. All that is left is

a dark mark on the cobbles, partially covered by faded blooms.

By the entrance of the inn, the bus for Mexico City is about to leave. The red arrow is pointing towards the outer thruway. I take my old stand beneath the *bourgainvillea*, unrecognized, unsought.

I watch as, one by one, two by two, the *turistas* laden with paper flowers, straw animals, blankets and fruits from the *Bazaar*, push and shove each other merrily into the dark, cavernous interior. The overhead reading lights go on inside, as the bus moves out into the heavy traffic.

The toes on my right foot are beginning to ache. I feel as though they are actually there, cramped inside my leather boot. My right hand hurts and my right forefinger feels sore from pressing so on the trigger. There was so much anger, so much venom that had to come out. I look down at my right hand to see if there is a blister forming, or a bruise, but all I see is my empty sleeve, pinned up to the elbow. I can feel the pain, though. I swear it. It will always be with me.

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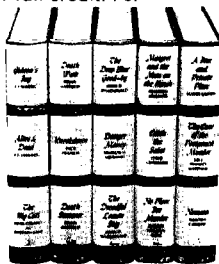
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